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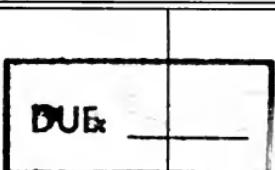
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FENTON'S QUEST

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FENTON'S QUEST

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

'LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET'

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



LONDON
WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER
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FENTON'S QUEST.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMMON FEVER.

A WARM summer evening, with a sultry haze brooding over the level landscape, and a Sabbath stillness upon all things in the village of Lidford, Midlandshire. In the remoter corners of the old gothic church the shadows are beginning to gather as the sermon draws near its close ; but in the centre aisle and about the pulpit there is broad daylight still shining-in from the wide western window, across the lower half of which there are tall figures of the Evangelists in old stained glass.

There are no choristers at Lidford, and the evening service is conducted in rather a drowsy way ; but there is a solemn air of repose about the gray old church that should be conducive to

tranquil thoughts and pious meditations. Simple and earnest have been the words of the sermon, simple and earnest seem the countenances of the congregation looking reverently upwards at the face of their pastor ; and one might fancy, contemplating that grand old church, so much too spacious for the needs of the little flock gathered there to-night, that Lidford was a forgotten, half-deserted corner of this earth, in which a man, tired of the press and turmoil of the world, might find an almost monastic solitude and calm.

So thought a gentleman in the Squire's pew—a good-looking man of about thirty, who was finishing his first Sunday at Lidford by devout attendance at evening service. He had been thinking a good deal about this quiet country life during the service, wondering whether it was not the best life a man could live, after all, and thinking it all the sweeter because of his own experience, which had lain chiefly in cities.

He was a certain Mr. Gilbert Fenton, an Australian merchant, and was on a visit to his sister, who had married the principal land-owner in Lidford, Martin Lister—a man whose father had been called ‘the Squire.’ The lady sat oppo-

site her brother in the wide old family pew to-night—a handsome-looking matron, with a little rosy-cheeked damsel sitting by her side—a damsel with flowing auburn hair, tiny hat and feather, and bright scarlet stockings, looking very much as if she had walked out of a picture by Mr. Millais.

The congregation stood up to sing a hymn when the sermon was ended, and Gilbert Fenton turned his face towards the opposite line of pews, in one of which, very near him, there was a girl, at whom Mrs. Lister had caught her brother looking very often during the service just concluded.

It was a face that a man could scarcely look upon once without finding his glances wandering back to it afterwards; not quite a perfect face, but a very bright and winning one. Large gray eyes, with a wonderful light in them, under dark lashes and darker brows; a complexion that had a dusky pallor, a delicate semi-transparent olive-tint that one seldom sees out of a Spanish picture; a sweet rosy mouth, and a piquant little nose of no particular order, made up the catalogue of this young lady's charms. But in a face worth looking at there is always something that cannot be

put into words ; and the brightest and best attributes of this face were quite beyond translation. It was a face one might almost call ‘ splendid ’—there was such a light and glory about it at some moments. Gilbert Fenton thought so to-night, as he saw it in the full radiance of the western sunlight, the lips parted as the girl sang, the clear gray eyes looking upward.

She was not alone : a portly genial-looking old man stood by her side, and accompanied her to the church-porch when the hymn was over. Here they both lingered a moment to shake hands with Mrs. Lister, very much to Gilbert Fenton’s satisfaction. They walked along the churchyard-path together, and Gilbert gave his sister’s arm a little tug, which meant, ‘ Introduce me.’

‘ My brother Mr. Fenton, Captain Sedgewick, Miss Nowell.’

The Captain shook hands with Gilbert. ‘ Delighted to know you, Mr. Fenton ; delighted to know any one belonging to Mrs. Lister. You are going to stop down here for some time, I hope.’

‘ I fear not for very long, Captain Sedgewick. I am a business man, you see, and can’t afford to take a long holiday from the City.’

Mrs. Lister laughed. ‘My brother is utterly devoted to commercial pursuits,’ she said; ‘I think he believes every hour wasted that he spends out of his counting-house.’

‘And yet I was thinking in church this evening that a man’s life might be happier in such a place as this, drifting away in a kind of dreamy idleness, than the greatest successes possible to commerce could ever make it.’

‘You would very soon be tired of your dreamy idleness,’ answered his sister, ‘and sigh for your office and your club.’

‘The country suits old people, who have played their part in life, and made an end of it,’ said the Captain. ‘It suits my little girl here very well, too,’ he added, with a fond glance at his companion; ‘she has her birds and her flowers, and her books and music; and I don’t think she ever sighs for anything gayer than Lidford.’

‘Never, uncle George,’ said the girl, slipping her hand through his arm. And Gilbert Fenton saw that those two were very fond of each other.

They came to the end of a shady winding lane at this moment, and Captain Sedgewick and Miss Nowell wished Mrs. Lister and her brother good-

evening, and went away down the lane arm-in-arm.

'What a lovely girl she is!' said Gilbert when they were gone.

'Lovely is rather a strong word, Gilbert,' Mrs. Lister answered coldly; 'she is certainly pretty, but I hope you are not going to lose your heart in that direction.'

'There is no fear of that. A man may admire a girl's face without being in any danger of losing his heart. But why not in that direction, Belle? Is there any special objection to the lady?'

'Only that she is a nobody, without either money or position; and I think you ought to have both when you marry.'

'Thanks for the implied compliment; but I do not fancy that an Australian merchant can expect to secure a wife of very exalted position; and I am the last man in the world to marry for money.'

'I don't for a moment suppose you would marry any one you didn't like, from mercenary considerations; but there is no reason you should make a foolish match.'

'Of course not. I think it very doubtful

whether I shall ever marry at all. I am just the kind of man to go down to my grave a bachelor.'

' Why so, Gilbert ?'

' Well, I can hardly tell you, my dear. Perhaps I am rather difficult to please—just a little stony-hearted and invulnerable. I know that since I was a boy, and got over my schoolboy love-affairs, I have never seen the woman who could touch my heart. I have met plenty of pretty women, and plenty of brilliant women, of course, in society ; and have admired them, and there an end. I have never seen a woman whose face impressed me so much at first sight as the face of your friend Miss Nowell.'

' I am very sorry for that.'

' But why, Belle ?'

' Because the girl is a nobody—less than nobody. There is an unpleasant kind of mystery about her birth.'

' How is that ? Her uncle, Captain Sedgewick, seems to be a gentleman.'

' Captain Sedgewick is very well, but he is not her uncle ; he adopted her when she was a very little girl.'

'But who are her people, and how did she fall into his hands?'

'I have never heard that. He is not very fond of talking about the subject. When we first came to know them, he told us that Marian was only his adopted niece ; and he has never told us any more than that.'

'She is the daughter of some friend, I suppose. They seem very much attached to each other.'

'Yes, she is very fond of him, and he of her. She is an amiable girl ; I have nothing to say against her—but—'

'But what, Belle ?'

'I shouldn't like you to fall in love with her.'

'But I should, mamma !' cried the damsel in scarlet stockings, who had absorbed every word of the foregoing conversation. 'I should like uncle Gil to love Marian just as I love her. She is the dearest girl in the world. When we had a juvenile party last winter, it was Marian who dressed the Christmas-tree—every bit ; and she played the piano for us all the evening, didn't she, mamma ?'

'She is very good-natured, Lucy ; but you

mustn't talk nonsense; and you ought not to listen when your uncle and I are talking. It is very rude.'

'But I can't help hearing you, mamma.'

They were at home by this time, within the grounds of a handsome red-brick house of the early Georgian era, which had been the property of the Listers ever since it was built. Without, the gardens were a picture of neatness and order; within, everything was solid and comfortable: the furniture of a somewhat ponderous and exploded fashion, but handsome withal, and brightened here and there by some concession to modern notions of elegance or ease—a dainty little table for books, a luxurious arm-chair, and so on.

Martin Lister was a gentleman chiefly distinguished by good-nature, hospitable instincts, and an enthusiastic devotion to agriculture. There were very few things in common between him and his brother-in-law the Australian merchant, but they got on very well together for a short time. Gilbert Fenton pretended to be profoundly interested in the thrilling question of drainage, deep or superficial, and seemed to enter unreservedly into every discussion of the latest inven-

tion or improvement in agricultural machinery ; and in the mean time he really liked the repose of the country, and appreciated the varying charms of landscape and atmosphere with a fervour unfelt by the man who had been born and reared amidst those pastoral scenes.

The two men smoked their cigars together in a quietly companionable spirit, strolling about the gardens and farm, dropping-out a sentence now and then, and anon falling into a lazy reverie, each pondering upon his own affairs— Gilbert meditating transactions with foreign houses, risky bargains with traders of doubtful solvency, or hazardous investments in stocks, as the case might be ; the gentleman farmer ruminating upon the chances of a good harvest, or the probable value of his Scotch short-horns.

Mr. Lister had preferred lounging about the farm with a cigar in his mouth to attendance at church upon this particular Sunday evening. He had finished his customary round of inspection by this time, and was sitting by one of the open windows of the drawing-room, with his body in one luxurious chair, and his legs extonded upon another, deep in the study of the *Gardener's*

Chronicle, which he flung aside upon the appearance of his family.

‘Well, Toddlekins,’ he cried to the little girl, ‘I hope you were very attentive to the sermon; listened for two, and made up for your lazy dad. That’s a vicarious kind of devotion that ought to be permitted occasionally to a hard-working fellow like me.—I’m glad you’ve come back to give us some tea, Belle. Don’t go upstairs; let Susan carry up your bonnet and shawl. It’s nearly nine o’clock. Toddlekins wants her tea before she goes to bed.’

‘Lucy has had her tea in the nursery,’ said Mrs. Lister, as she took her seat before the cups and saucers.

‘But she will have some more with papa,’ replied Martin, who had an amiable knack of spoiling his children. There were only two—this bright fair-haired Lucy, aged nine, and a sturdy boy of seven.

They sipped their tea, and talked a little about who had been at church and who had not been, and the room was filled with that atmosphere of dulness which seems to prevail in such households upon a summer Sunday evening; a kind of palp-

able emptiness which sets a man speculating how many years he may have to live, and how many such Sundays he may have to spend. He is apt to end by wondering a little whether life is really worth the trouble it costs, when almost the best thing that can come of it is a condition of comfortable torpor like this.

Gilbert Fenton put down his cup and went over to one of the open windows. It was nearly as dark as it was likely to be that midsummer night. A new moon was shining faintly in the clear evening sky; and here and there a solitary star shone with a tremulous brightness. The shadows of the trees made spots of solemn darkness on the wide lawn before the windows, and a warm faint sweetness came from the crowded flower-beds, where all the flowers in this light were of one grayish silvery hue.

'It's almost too warm an evening for the house,' said Gilbert; 'I think I'll take a stroll.'

'I'd come with you, old fellow, but I've been all round the farm, and I'm dead-beat,' said good-natured Martin Lister.

'Thanks, Martin; I wouldn't think of disturbing you. You look the picture of comfort in

that easy-chair. I shall only stay long enough to finish a cigar.'

He walked slowly across the lawn—a noble stretch of level greensward with dark spreading cedars and fine old beeches scattered about it ; he walked slowly towards the gates, lighting his cigar as he went, and thinking. He was thinking of his past life, and of his future. What was it to be ? A dull hackneyed course of money-making, chequered only by the dreary vicissitudes of trade, and brightened only by such selfish pleasures as constitute the recreations of a business man—an occasional dinner at Blackwall or Richmond, a week's shooting in the autumn, a little easy-going hunting in the winter, a hurried scamper over some of the beaten continental roads, or a fortnight at a German spa ? These had been his pleasures hitherto, and he had found life pleasant enough. Perhaps he had been too busy to question the pleasantness of these things. It was only now that he found himself away from the familiar arena of his daily life, with neither employment nor distraction, that he was able to look back upon his career deliberately, and ask himself whether it was one that he could go on liv-

ing without weariness for the remainder of his days.

He had been at this time a little more than seven years in business. He had been bred-up with no expectation of ever having to take his place in the counting-house, had been educated at Eton and Oxford, and had been taught to anticipate a handsome fortune from his father. All these expectations had been disappointed by Mr. Fenton's sudden death at a period of great commercial disturbance. The business was found in a state of entanglement that was very near insolvency; and wise friends told Gilbert Fenton that the only hope of coming well out of these perplexities lay with himself. The business was too good to be sacrificed, and the business was all his father had left behind him, with the exception of a houseful of handsome furniture, two or three carriages, and a couple of pairs of horses, which were sold by auction within a few weeks of the funeral.

Gilbert Fenton took upon himself the management of the business. He had a clear comprehensive intellect, which adapted itself very easily to commerce. He put his shoulder to the wheel

with a will, and worked for the first three years of his business career as it is not given to many men to work in the course of their lives. By that time the ship had been steered clear of all rocks and quicksands, and rode the commercial waters gallantly. Gilbert was not a rich man, but was in a fair way to become a rich man ; and the name of Fenton stood as high as in the palmiest days of his father's career.

His sister had fortunately married Martin Lister some years before her father's death, and had received her dowry at the time of her marriage. Gilbert had only himself to work for. At first he had worked for the sake of his dead father's honour and repute ; later he fell into a groove, like other men, and worked for the love of money-making—not with any sordid love of money, but with that natural desire to accumulate which grows out of a business career.

To-night he was in an unusually thoughtful humour, and inclined to weigh things in the balance with a doubtfulness as to their value which was new to him. The complete idleness and emptiness of his life in the country had made him meditative. Was it worth living, that monoton-

ous business life of his ? Would not the time soon come in which its dreariness would oppress him as the dulness of Lidford House had oppressed him to-night ? His youth was fast going—nay, had it not indeed gone from him for ever ? had not youth left him all at once when he began his commercial career ?—and the pleasures that had been fresh enough within the last few years were rapidly growing stale. He knew the German spas, the pine-groves where the band played, the gambling-saloons and their company, by heart, though he had never stayed more than a fortnight at any one of them. He had exhausted Brittany and the South of France in those rapid scampers ; skimmed the cream of their novelty, at any rate. He did not care very much for field-sports, and hunted and shot in a jog-trot safe kind of way, with a view to the benefit of his health, which savoured of old bachelorhood. And as for the rest of his pleasures—the social rubber at his club, the Blackwall or Richmond dinners—it seemed only custom that made them agreeable.

‘ If I had gone to the Bar, as I intended to do before my father’s death, I should have had an

object in life,' he thought, as he puffed slowly at his cigar; 'but a commercial man has nothing to hope for in the way of fame—nothing to work for except money. I have a good mind to sell the business, now that it is worth selling, and go in for the Bar after all, late as it is.'

He had thought of this more than once; but he knew the fancy was a foolish one, and that his friends would laugh at him for his folly.

He was beyond the grounds of Lidford House by this time, sauntering onward in the fair summer night; not indifferent to the calm loveliness of the scene around him, only conscious that there was some void within himself which these things could not fill. He walked along the road by which he and his sister had come back from church, and turned into the lane at the end of which Captain Sedgewick had bidden them good-night. He had been down this lane before to-night, and knew that it was one of the prettiest walks about Lidford; so there was scarcely anything strange in the fact that he should choose this promenade for his evening saunter.

The rustic way, wide enough for a wagon, and with sloping grassy banks, and tall straggling

hedges full of dog-roses and honeysuckle, led towards a river—a fair winding stream, which was one of the glories of Lidford. A little before one came to the river, the lane opened upon a green, where there was a mill, and a miller's cottage, a rustic inn, and two or three other houses of more genteel pretensions.

Gilbert Fenton wondered which of these was the habitation of Captain Sedgewick, concluding that the half-pay officer and his niece must needs live in one of them. He reconnoitred them as he went by the low garden-fences, over which he could see the pretty lawns and flower-beds, with clusters of evergreens here and there, and a wealth of roses and seringa. One of them, the prettiest and most secluded, was also the smallest; a low white-walled cottage, with casement windows above, and old-fashioned bow-windows below, and a porch overgrown with roses. The house lay back a little way from the green; and there was a tiny brook running beside the holly hedge that bounded the garden, spanned by a little rustic bridge before the gate.

Pausing just beside this bridge, Mr. Fenton heard the joyous barking of a dog, and caught a

brief glimpse of a light muslin dress flitting across the little lawn at one side of the cottage. While he was wondering about the owner of this dress, the noisy dog came rushing towards the gate, and in the next moment a girlish figure appeared in the winding path that went in and out among the flower-beds.

Gilbert Fenton knew that tall slim figure very well. He had guessed rightly, and this low white-walled cottage was really Captain Sedgewick's. It seemed to him as if a kind of instinct had brought him to that precise spot.

Miss Nowell came to the gate, and stood there looking out, with a Skye terrier in her arms. Gilbert drew back a little, and flung his cigar into the brook. She had not seen him yet. Her looks were wandering far away across the green, as if in search of some one.

Gilbert Fenton stood quite still watching her. She looked even prettier without her bonnet than she had looked in the church, he thought: the rich dark-brown hair gathered in a great knot at the back of the graceful head; the perfect throat circled by a broad black ribbon, from which there hung an old-fashioned gold cross; the youthful

figure set-off by the girlish muslin dress, so becoming in its utter simplicity.

He could not stand there for ever looking at her, pleasant as it might be to him to contemplate the lovely face; so he made a little movement at last, and came a few steps nearer to the gate.

'Good-evening once more, Miss Nowell,' he said.

She looked up at him, surprised by his sudden appearance, but in no manner embarrassed.

'Good-evening, Mr. Fenton. I did not see you till this moment. I was looking for my uncle. He has gone out for a little stroll while he smokes his cigar, and I expect him home every minute.'

'I have been indulging in a solitary cigar myself,' answered Gilbert. 'One is apt to be inspired with an antipathy to the house on this kind of evening. I left the Listers yawning over their tea-cups, and came out for a ramble. The aspect of the lane at which we parted company this evening tempted me down this way. What a pretty house you have! Do you know, I guessed that it was yours before I saw you.'

‘Indeed! You must have quite a talent for guessing.’

‘Not in a general way; but there is a fitness in things. Yes, I felt sure that this was your house.’

‘I am glad you like it,’ she answered simply. ‘Uncle George and I are very fond of it. But it must seem a poor little place to you after Lidford House.’

‘Lidford House is spacious, and comfortable, and commonplace. One could hardly associate the faintest touch of romance with such a place. But about this one might fancy anything. Ah, here is your uncle, I see.’

Captain Sedgewick came towards them, surprised at seeing Mr. Fenton, with whom he shook hands again very cordially, and who repeated his story about the impossibility of enduring to stop in the house on such a night.

The Captain insisted on his going in-doors with them, however; and he exhibited no disinclination to linger in the cottage drawing-room, though it was only about a fourth of the size of that at Lidford House. It looked a very pretty room in the lamplight, with quaint old-fashioned

furniture, the freshest and most delicate chintz hangings and coverings of chairs and sofas, and some valuable old china here and there.

Captain Sedgewick had plenty to say for himself, and was pleased to find an intelligent stranger to converse with. His health had failed him long ago, and he had turned his back upon the world of action for ever; but he was as cheerful and hopeful as if his existence had been the gayest possible to man.

Of course they talked a little of military matters, the changes that had come about in the service—none of them changes for the better, according to the Captain, who was a little behind the times in his way of looking at these things.

He ordered in a bottle of claret for his guest, and Gilbert Fenton found himself seated by the open bow-window looking out at the dusky lawn and drinking his wine, as much at home as if he had been a visitor at the Captain's for the last ten years. Marian Nowell sat on the other side of the room, with the lamplight shining on her dark-brown hair, and with that much-to-be-envied Skye terrier on her lap. Gilbert glanced across at her every now and then while he was talking

with her uncle ; and by and by she came over to the window and stood behind the Captain's chair, with her clasped hands resting upon his shoulder.

Gilbert contrived to engage her in the conversation presently. He found her quite able to discuss the airy topics which he started—the last new volume of poems, the picture of the year, and so on. There was nothing awkward or provincial in her manner ; and if she did not say anything particularly brilliant, there was good sense in all her remarks, and she had a bright animated way of speaking that was very charming.

She had lived a life of peculiar seclusion, rarely going beyond the village of Lidford, and had contrived to find perfect happiness in that simple existence. The Captain told Mr. Fenton this in the course of their talk.

'I have not been able to afford so much as a visit to London for my darling,' he said ; 'but I do not know that she is any the worse for her ignorance of the great world. The grand point is that she should be happy, and I thank God that she has been happy hitherto.'

'I should be very ungrateful if I were not, uncle George,' the girl said in a half whisper.

Captain Sedgewick gave a thoughtful sigh, and was silent for a little while after this ; and then the talk went on again until the clock upon the chimney-piece struck the half-hour after ten, and Gilbert Fenton rose to say good-night. ‘ I have stayed a most unconscionable time, I fear,’ he said ; ‘ but I had really no idea it was so late.’

‘ Pray, don’t hurry away,’ replied the Captain. ‘ You ought to help me to finish that bottle. Marian and I are not the earliest people in Lidford.’

Gilbert would have had no objection to loiter away another half-hour in the bow-window, talking politics with the Captain, or light literature with Miss Nowell, but he knew that his prolonged absence must have already caused some amount of wonder at Lidford House ; so he held firmly to his good-night, shook hands with his new friends, holding Marian Nowell’s soft slender hand in his for the first time, and wondering at the strange magic of her touch, and then went out into the dreamy atmosphere of the summer night a changed creature.

‘ Is this love at first sight ?’ he asked himself, as he walked homeward along the rustic lane,

where dog-roses and the starry flowers of the wild convolvulus gleamed whitely in the uncertain light. ‘Is it? I should have been the last of men to believe such a thing possible yesterday; and yet to-night I feel as if that girl were destined to be the ruling influence of my future life. Why is it? Because she is lovely? Surely not. Surely I am not so weak a fool as to be caught by a beautiful face! And yet what else do I know of her? Absolutely nothing. She may be the shallowest of living creatures—the most selfish, the falsest, the basest. No; I do not believe she could ever be false or unworthy. There is something noble in her face—something more than mere beauty. Heaven knows, I have seen enough of that in my time. I could scarcely be so childish as to be bewitched by a pair of gray eyes and a rosy mouth; there must be something more. And, after all, this is most likely a passing fancy, born out of the utter idleness and dulness of this place. I shall go back to London in a week or two, and forget Marian Nowell. Marian Nowell!’

He repeated the name with unspeakable tenderness in his tone—a deeper feeling than would have seemed natural to a passing fancy. It was

more like a symptom of sickening for life's great fever.

It was close upon eleven when he made his appearance in his sister's drawing-room, where Martin Lister was enjoying a comfortable nap, while his wife stifled her yawns over a mild theological treatise.

He had to listen to a good deal of wonderment about the length of his absence, and was fain to confess to an accidental encounter with Captain Sedgewick, which had necessitated his going into the cottage.

'Why, what could have taken you that way, Gilbert?'

'A truant fancy, I suppose, my dear. It is as good a way as any other.'

Mrs. Lister sighed, and shook her head doubtfully. 'What fools you men are,' she said, 'about a pretty face!'

'Including Martin, Belle, when he fell in love with your fair self?'

'Martin did not stare me out of countenance in church, sir. But you have almost kept us waiting for prayers.'

The servants came filing in. Martin Lister

woke with a start, and Gilbert Fenton knelt down among his sister's household to make his evening orisons. But his thoughts were not easily to be fixed that night. They wandered very wide of that simple family prayer, and made themselves into a vision of the future, in which he saw his life changed and brightened by the companionship of a fair young wife.

CHAPTER II.

MARIAN'S STORY.

THE days passed, and there was no more dulness or emptiness for Gilbert Fenton in his life at Lidford. He went every day to the white-walled cottage on the green. It was easy enough to find some fresh excuse for each visit—a book or a piece of music which he had recommended to Miss Nowell, and had procured from London for her, or something of an equally frivolous character. The Captain was always cordial, always pleased to see him. His visits were generally made in the evening; and it was his delight to linger over the pretty little round table by the bow-window drinking tea dispensed by Marian. The bright homelike room, the lovely face turned so trustingly to his; these were the things which made that fair vision of the future that haunted him so often now. He fancied himself the master of some pretty villa in the suburbs—at Kings-

ton or Twickenham, perhaps—with a garden sloping down to the water's edge, a lawn on which he and his wife and some chosen friend might sit after dinner in the long summer evenings, sipping their claret or their tea, as the case might be, and watching the last rosy glow of the sunset fade and die upon the river. He fancied himself with this girl for his wife, and the delight of going back from the dull dryasdust labours of his city life to a home in which she would bid him welcome. He behaved with a due amount of caution, and did not give the young lady any reason to suspect the state of the case yet awhile. Marian was perfectly devoid of coquetry, and had no idea that this gentleman's constant presence at the cottage could have any reference to herself. He liked her uncle; what more natural than that he should like that gallant soldier, whom Marian adored as the first of mankind? And it was out of his liking for the Captain that he came so often.

The Captain, however, had not been slow to discover the real state of affairs, and the discovery had given him unqualified satisfaction. For a long time his quiet contentment in this pleasant,

simple, easy-going life had been clouded by anxious thoughts about Marian's future. His death —should that event happen before she married —must needs leave her utterly destitute. The little property from which his income was derived was not within his power to bequeath. It would pass, upon his death, to one of his nephews. The furniture of the cottage might realise a few hundreds, which would most likely be, for the greater part, absorbed by the debts of the year and the expenses of his funeral. Altogether the outlook was a dreary one, and the Captain had suffered many a sharp pang in brooding over it. Lovely and attractive as Marian was, the chances of an advantageous marriage were not many for her in such a place as Lidford. It was natural, therefore, that Captain Sedgewick should welcome the advent of such a man as Gilbert Fenton—a man of good position and ample means; a thoroughly unaffected and agreeable fellow into the bargain, and quite handsome enough to win any woman's heart, the Captain thought. He watched the two young people together, after the notion of this thing came into his mind, and about the sentiments of one of them he felt no shadow of

doubt. He was not quite so clear about the feelings of the other. There was a perfect frankness and ease about Marian that seemed scarcely compatible with the growth of that tender passion which generally reveals itself by a certain amount of reserve, and is more eloquent in silence than in speech. Marian seemed always pleased to see Gilbert, always interested in his society; but she did not seem more than this, and the Captain was sorely perplexed.

There was a dinner-party at Lidford House during the second week of Gilbert's acquaintance with these new friends, and Captain Sedgewick and his adopted niece were invited.

'They are pleasant people to have at a dinner-party,' Mrs. Lister said, when she discussed the invitation with her husband and brother; 'so I suppose they may as well come,—though I don't want to encourage your folly, Gilbert.'

'My folly, as you are kind enough to call it, is not dependent on your encouragement, Belle.'

'Then it is really a serious case, I suppose,' said Martin.

'I really admire Miss Nowell—more than I

ever admired any one before, if that is what you call a serious case, Martin.'

'Rather like it, I think,' the other answered with a laugh.

The dinner was a very quiet business—a couple of steady-going country gentlemen with their wives and daughters, a son or two more or less dashing and sportsmanlike in style, the rector and his wife, Captain Sedgewick and Miss Nowell. Gilbert had to take one of the portly matrons in to dinner, and found himself placed at some distance from Miss Nowell during the repast; but he was able to make up for this afterwards, when he slipped out of the dining-room some time before the rest of the gentlemen, and found Marian seated at the piano playing a dreamy reverie of Goria's, while the other ladies were gathered in a little knot discussing the last village scandal.

He went over to the piano and stood by her while she played, looking fondly down at the graceful head, and the white hands gliding gently over the keys. He did not disturb her by much talk; it was quite enough happiness for him to stand there watching her as she played. Later,

when a couple of whist-tables had been established and the brilliantly-lighted room had grown hot, these two sat together at one of the open windows, looking out at the moonlit lawn; one of them supremely happy, and yet with a kind of undefined sense that this supreme happiness was a dangerous thing—a thing that it would be wise to pluck out of his heart and have done with.

‘My holiday is very nearly over, Miss Nowell,’ Gilbert Fenton said by and by. ‘I shall have to go back to London and the old commercial life, the letter-writing and interview-giving, and all that kind of thing.’

‘Your sister said you were very fond of the counting-house, Mr. Fenton,’ she answered lightly. ‘I daresay, if you would only confess the truth, you are heartily tired of the country, and will be delighted to resume your business life.’

‘I should never be tired of Lidford.’

‘Indeed! and yet it is generally considered such a dull place.’

‘It has not been so to me. It will always be a shining spot in my memory, different and distinct from all other places.’

She looked up at him, wondering a little at

his earnest tone, and their eyes met—his full of tenderness, hers only shy and surprised. It was not then that the words he had to speak could be spoken, and he let the conversation drift into a general discussion of the merits of town or country life. But he was determined that the words should be spoken very soon.

He went to the cottage next day, between three and four upon a drowsy summer afternoon, and was so fortunate as to find Marian sitting under one of the walnut-trees at the end of the garden reading a novel, with her faithful Skye terrier in attendance. He seated himself on a low garden-chair by her side, and took the book gently from her hand.

'I have come to spoil your afternoon's amusement,' he said. 'I have not many days more to spend in Lidford, you know, and I want to make the most of a short time.'

'The book is not particularly interesting,' Miss Nowell answered, laughing. 'I'll go and tell my uncle you are here. He is taking an afternoon nap; but I know he'll be pleased to see you.'

'Don't tell him just yet,' said Mr. Fenton,

detaining her. ‘I have something to say to you this afternoon,—something that it is wiser to say at once, perhaps, though I have been willing enough to put off the hour of saying it, as a man may well be when all his future life depends upon the issue of a few words. I think you must know what I mean, Miss Nowell. Marian, I think you can guess what is coming. I told you last night how sweet Lidford had been to me.’

‘Yes,’ she said, with a bright inquiring look in her eyes. ‘But what have I to do with that?’

‘Everything. It is you who have made the little country village my paradise. O Marian, tell me that it has not been a fool’s paradise! My darling, I love you with all my heart and soul, with an honest man’s first and only love. Promise that you will be my wife.’

He took the hand that lay loosely on her lap, and pressed it in both his own. She withdrew it gently, and sat looking at him with a face that had grown suddenly pale.

‘You do not know what you are asking,’ she said; ‘you cannot know. Captain Sedgewick is not my uncle. He does not even know who my

parents were. I am the most obscure creature in the world.'

'Not one degree less dear to me because of that, Marian; only the dearer. Tell me, my darling, is there any hope for me?'

'I never thought—' she faltered; 'I had no idea—'

'That to know you was to love you. My life and soul, I have loved you from the hour I first saw you in Lidford church. I was a doomed man from that moment, Marian. O my dearest, trust me, and it shall go hard if I do not make your future life a happy one. Granted that I am ten years—more than ten years—your senior, that is a difference on the right side. I have fought the battle of life, and have conquered, and am strong enough to protect and shelter the woman I love. Come, Marian, I am waiting for a word of hope.'

'And do you really love me?' she asked wonderingly. 'It seems so strange after so short a time.'

'I loved you from that first evening in the church, my dear.'

'I am very grateful to you,' she said slowly, 'and I am proud—I have reason to be proud—of

your preference. But I have known you such a short time. I am afraid to give you any promise.'

'Afraid of me, or of yourself, Marian?'

'Of myself.'

'In what way?'

'I am only a foolish frivolous girl. You offer me so much more than I deserve in offering me your love like this. I scarcely know if I have a heart to give to any one. I know that I have never loved anybody except my one friend and protector, my dear adopted uncle.'

'But you do not say that you cannot love me, Marian. Perhaps I have spoken too soon, after all. It seems to me that I have known you for a lifetime; but that is only a lover's fancy. I seem almost a stranger to you, perhaps?'

'Almost,' she answered, looking at him with clear truthful eyes.

'That is rather hard upon me, my dear. But I can wait. You do not know how patient I can be.'

He began to talk of indifferent subjects after this, a little depressed and disheartened by the course the interview had taken. He felt that he

had been too precipitate. What was there in a fortnight's intimacy to justify such a step, except to himself, with whom time had been measured by a different standard since he had known Marian Nowell ? He was angry with his own eagerness, which had brought upon him this semi-defeat.

Happily Miss Nowell had not told him that his case was hopeless, had not forbidden him to approach the subject again; nor had she exhibited any involuntary sign of aversion to him. Surprise had appeared the chief sentiment caused by his revelation. Surprise was natural to such girlish inexperience; and after surprise had passed away, more tender feelings might arise, a latent tenderness unsuspected hitherto.

'I think a woman can scarcely help returning a man's love, if he is only as thoroughly in earnest as I am,' Gilbert Fenton said to himself, as he sat under the walnut-trees trying to talk pleasantly, and to ignore the serious conversation which had preceded that careless talk.

He saw the Captain alone next day, and told him what had happened. George Sedgewick listened to him with profound attention and a grave anxious face.

'She didn't reject you?' he said, when Gilbert had finished his story.

'Not in plain words. But there was not much to indicate hope. And yet I cling to the fancy that she will come to love me in the end. To think otherwise would be utter misery to me. I cannot tell you how dearly I love her, and how weak I am about this business. It seems contemptible for a man to talk about a broken heart; but I shall carry an empty one to my grave unless I win Marian Nowell for my wife.'

'You shall win her!' cried the Captain energetically. 'You are a noble fellow, sir, and will make her an excellent husband. She will not be so foolish as to reject such a disinterested affection. Besides,' he added, hesitating a little, 'I have a very shrewd notion that all this apparent indifference is only shyness on my little girl's part, and that she loves you.'

'You believe that!' cried Gilbert eagerly.

'It is only guesswork on my part, of course. I am an old bachelor, you see, and have had very little experience as to the signs and tokens of the tender passion. But I will sound my little girl by and by. She will be more ready to con-

fess the truth to her old uncle than she would to you, perhaps. I think you have been a trifle hasty about this affair. There is so much in time and custom.'

'It is only a cold kind of love that grows out of custom,' Gilbert answered gloomily. 'But I daresay you are right, and that it would have been better for me to have waited.'

'You may hope everything, if you can only be patient,' said the Captain. 'I tell you frankly, that nothing would make me happier than to see my dear child married to a good man. I have had many dreary thoughts about her future of late. I think you know that I have nothing to leave her.'

'I have never thought of that. If she were destined to inherit all the wealth of the Rothschilds, she could be no dearer to me than she is.'

'Ah, what a noble thing true love is! And do you know that she is not really my niece—only a poor waif that I adopted fourteen years ago?'

'I have heard as much from her own lips. There is nothing, except some unworthiness in herself, that could make any change in my estimation of her.'

'Unworthiness in herself! You need never fear that. But I must tell you Marian's story before this business goes any farther. Will you come and smoke your cigar with me to-night? She is going to drink tea at a neighbour's, and we shall be alone. They are all fond of her, poor child.'

'I shall be very happy to come. And in the mean time, you will try and ascertain the real state of her feelings without distressing her in any way; and you will tell me the truth with all frankness, even if it is to be a deathblow to all my hopes?'

'Even if it should be that. But I do not fear such a melancholy result. I think Marian is sensible enough to know the value of an honest man's heart.'

Gilbert quitted the Captain in a more hopeful spirit than that in which he had gone to the cottage that day. It was only reasonable that this man should be the best judge of his niece's feelings.

Left alone, George Sedgewick paced the room in a meditative mood, with his hands thrust deep into his trousers-pockets, and his gray head bent thoughtfully.

'She must like him,' he muttered to himself. 'Why should not she like him?—good-looking, generous, clever, prosperous, well-connected, and over head and ears in love with her. Such a marriage is the very thing I have been praying for. And without such a marriage, what would be her fate when I am gone? A drudge and dependent in some middle-class family perhaps—tyrannised over and tormented by a brood of vulgar children.'

Marian came in at the open window while he was still pacing to and fro with a disturbed countenance.

'My dear uncle, what is the matter?' she asked, going up to him and laying a caressing hand upon his shoulder. 'I know you never walk about like that unless you are worried by something.'

'I am not worried to-day, my love; only a little perplexed,' answered the Captain, detaining the caressing little hand, and planting himself face to face with his niece, in the full sunlight of the broad bow-window. 'Marian, I thought you and I had no secrets from each other.'

'Secrets, uncle George!'

‘Yes, my dear. Haven’t you something pleasant to tell your old uncle—something that a girl generally likes telling? You had a visitor yesterday afternoon while I was asleep.’

‘Mr. Fenton.’

‘Mr. Fenton. He has been here with me just now; and I know that he asked you to be his wife.’

‘He did, uncle George.’

‘And you didn’t refuse him, Marian?’

‘Not positively, uncle George. He took me so much by surprise, you see; and I really don’t know how to refuse any one; but I think I ought to have made him understand more clearly that I meant no.’

‘But why, my dear?’

‘Because I am sure I don’t care about him as much as I ought to care. I like him very well, you know, and think him clever and agreeable, and all that kind of thing.’

‘That will soon grow into a warmer feeling, Marian; at least, I trust in God that it will do so.’

‘Why, dear uncle?’

‘Because I have set my heart upon this marriage. O Marian, my love, I have never ventured

to speak to you about your future—the days that must come when I am dead and gone; and you can never know how many anxious hours I have spent thinking of it. Such a marriage as this would secure you happiness and prosperity in the years to come.'

She clung about him fondly, telling him she cared little what might become of her life when he should be lost to her. *That* grief must needs be the crowning sorrow of her existence; and it would matter nothing to her what might come afterwards.

'But, my dear love, "afterwards" will make the greater part of your life. We must consider these things seriously, Marian. A good man's affection is not to be thrown away rashly. You have known Mr. Fenton a very short time; and perhaps it is only natural you should think of him with comparative indifference.'

'I did not say I was indifferent to him, uncle George; only that I do not love him as he seems to love me. It would be a kind of sin to accept so much and to give so little.'

'The love will come, Marian; I am sure that it will come.'

She shook her head playfully.

'What a darling match-making uncle it is!' she said, and then kissed him and ran away.

She thought of Gilbert Fenton a good deal during the rest of that day; thought that it was a pleasant thing to be loved so truly, and hoped that she might always have him for her friend. When she went out to drink tea in the evening his image went with her; and she found herself making involuntary comparisons between a specimen of provincial youth whom she encountered at her friend's house and Mr. Fenton, very much to the advantage of the Australian merchant.

While Marian Nowell was away at this little social gathering, Captain Sedgewick and Gilbert Fenton sat under the walnut-trees smoking their cigars, with a bottle of claret on a little iron table before them.

'When I came back from India fourteen years ago on the sick-list,' began the Captain, 'I went down to Brighton, a place I had been fond of in my young days, to recruit. It was in the early spring, quite out of the fashionable season, and the town was very empty. My lodgings were in a dull street at the extreme east, leading away

from the sea, but within sight and sound of it. The solitude and quiet of the place suited me; and I used to walk up and down the cliff in the dusk of evening enjoying the perfect loneliness of the scene. The house I lived in was a comfortable one, kept by an elderly widow who was a pattern of neatness and propriety. There were no children; for some time no other lodgers; and the place was as quiet as the grave. All this suited me very well. I wanted rest, and I was getting it.

‘I had been at Brighton about a month, when the drawing-room floor over my head was taken by a lady, and her little girl of about five years old. I used to hear the child’s feet pattering about the room; but she was not a noisy child by any means; and when I did happen to hear her voice, it had a very pleasant sound to me. The lady was an invalid, and was a good deal of trouble, my landlady took occasion to tell me, as she had no maid of her own. Her name was Nowell.

‘Soon after this I encountered her on the cliff one afternoon with her little girl. The child and I had met once or twice before in the hall; and her recognition of me led to a little friendly talk

between me and the mother. She was a fragile delicate-looking woman, who had once been very pretty, but whose beauty had for the most part been worn away, either by ill-health or trouble. She was very young, five-and-twenty at the utmost. She told me that the little girl was her only child, and that her husband was away from England, but that she expected his return before long.

'After this we met almost every afternoon ; and I began to look out for these meetings, and our quiet talk upon the solitary cliff, as the pleasantest part of my day. There was a winning grace about this Mrs. Nowell's manner that I had never seen in any other woman ; and I grew to be more interested in her than I cared to confess to myself. It matters little now ; and I may freely own how weak I was in those days.

'I could see that she was very ill, and I did not need the ominous hints of the landlady, who had contrived to question Mrs. Nowell's doctor, to inspire me with the dread that she might never recover. I thought of her a great deal, and watched the fading light in her eyes, and listened to the weakening tones of her voice, with a sense of trouble that seemed utterly disproportionate to

the occasion. I will not say that I loved her; neither the fact that she was another man's wife, nor the fact that she was soon to die, was ever absent from my mind when I thought of her. I will only say that she was more to me than any woman had ever been before, or has ever been since. It was the one sentimental episode of my life, and a very brief one.

'The weeks went by, and her husband did not come. I think the trouble and anxiety caused by his delay did a good deal towards hastening the inevitable end; but she bore her grief very quietly, and never uttered a complaint of him in my hearing. She paid her way regularly enough for a considerable time, and then all at once broke down, and confessed to the landlady that she had not a shilling more in the world. The woman was a hard creature, and told her that if that was the case, she must find some other lodgings, and immediately. I heard this, not from Mrs. Nowell, but from the landlady, who seemed to consider her conduct thoroughly justified by the highest code of morals. She was a lone unprotected woman, and how was she to pay her rent and taxes if her best floor was occupied by a non-paying tenant?

' I was by no means a rich man ; but I could not endure to think of that helpless dying creature thrust out into the streets ; and I told my land-lady that I would be answerable for Mrs. Nowell's rent, and for the daily expenses incurred on her behalf. Mr. Nowell would in all probability appear in good time to relieve me from the responsibility, but in the mean while that poor soul upstairs was not to be distressed. I begged that she might know nothing of this undertaking on my part.

' It was not long after this when our daily meetings on the cliff came to an end. Mild as the weather was by this time, Mrs. Nowell's doctor had forbidden her going out any longer. I knew that she had no maid to send out with the child, so I sent the servant up to ask her if she would trust the little one for a daily walk with me. This she was very pleased to do, and Marian became my dear little companion every afternoon. She had taken to me, as the phrase goes, from the very first. She was the gentlest, most engaging child I had ever met with—a little grave for her years, and tenderly thoughtful of others.

' One evening Mrs. Nowell sent for me. I went up to the drawing-room immediately, and

found her sitting in an easy-chair propped up by pillows, and very much changed for the worse since I had seen her last. She told me that she had discovered the secret of my goodness to her, as she called it, from the landlady, and that she had sent for me to thank me.

"I can give you nothing but thanks and blessings," she said, "for I am the most helpless creature in this world. I suppose my husband will come here before I die, and will relieve you from the risk you have taken for me; but he can never repay you for your goodness."

'I told her to give herself no trouble on my account; but I could not help saying, that I thought her husband had behaved shamefully in not coming to England to her long ere this.

"He knows that you are ill, I suppose?" I said.

"O yes, he knows that. I was ill when he sent me home. We had been travelling about the Continent almost ever since our marriage. He married me against his father's will, and lost all chance of a great fortune by doing so. I did not know how much he sacrificed at the time, or I should never have consented to his losing so much for my sake. I think the knowledge of

what he had lost came between us very soon. I know that his love for me has grown weaker as the years went by, and that I have been little better than a burden to him. I could never tell you how lonely my life has been in those great foreign cities, where there seems such perpetual gaiety and pleasure. I think I must have died of the solitude and dulness—the long dreary summer evenings, the dismal winter days—if it had not been for my darling child. She has been all the world to me. And, O God!" she cried, with a look of anguish that went to my heart, "what will become of her when I am dead, and she is left to the care of a selfish dissipated man?"

" You need never fear that she will be without one friend while I live," I said. " Little Marian is very dear to me, and I shall make it my business to watch over her career as well as I can."

' The poor soul clasped my hand, and pressed her feverish lips to it in a transport of gratitude. What a brute a man must have been who could neglect such a woman !

' After this I went up to her room every evening, and read to her a little, and cheered her as well as I could; but I believe her heart was

broken. The end came very suddenly at last. I had intended to question her about her husband's family; but the subject was a difficult one to approach, and I had put it off from day to day, hoping that she might rally a little, and would be in a better condition to discuss business matters.

'She never did rally. I was with her when she died, and her last act was to draw her child towards her with her feeble arms and lay my hand upon the little one's head, looking up at me with sorrowful pleading eyes. She was quite speechless then, but I knew what the look meant, and answered it.

"To the end of my life, my dear," I said, "I shall love and cherish her—to the end of my life."

'After this the child fell asleep in my arms as I sat by the bedside sharing the long melancholy watch with the landlady, who behaved very well at this sorrowful time. We sat in the quiet room all night, the little one wrapped in a shawl and nestled upon my breast. In the early summer morning Lucy Nowell died, very peacefully; and I carried Marian down to the sofa in the parlour,

and laid her there still asleep. She cried pitifully for her mother when she awoke, and I had to tell her that which it is so hard to tell a child.

'I wrote to Mr. Nowell at an address in Brussels which I found at the top of his last letter to his wife. No answer came. I wrote again, after a little while, with the same result; and, in the mean time, the child had grown fonder of me and dearer to me every day. I had hired a nursemaid for her, and had taken an upper room for her nursery; but she spent the greater part of her life with me, and I began to fancy that Providence intended I should keep her with me for the rest of her days. She told me, in her innocent childish way, that papa had never loved her as her mamma did. He had been always out of doors till very, very late at night. She had crept from her little bed sometimes when it was morning, quite light, and had found mamma in the sitting-room, with no fire, and the candles all burnt out, waiting for papa to come home.

'I put an advertisement, addressed to Mr. Percival Nowell, in the *Times* and in *Galignani*, for I felt that the child's future might depend

upon her father's acknowledgment of her in the present; but no reply came to these advertisements, and I settled in my own mind that this Nowell was a scoundrel, who had deliberately deserted his wife and child.

'The possessions of the poor creature who was gone were of no great value. There were some rather handsome clothes and a small collection of jewelry—some of it modern, the rest curious and old-fashioned. These latter articles I kept religiously, believing them to be family relics. The clothes and the modern trinkets I caused to be sold, and the small sum realised for them barely paid the expense of the funeral and grave. The arrears of rent and all other arrears fell upon me. I paid them, and then left Brighton with the child and nurse. I was born not twenty miles from this place, and I had a fancy for ending my days in my native county; so I came down to this part of the world, and looked about me a little, living in farmhouse lodgings here and there, until I found this cottage to let one day, and decided upon settling at Lidford. And now you know the whole story of Marian's adoption, Mr. Fenton. How happy we have been together, or

what she has been to me since that time, I could never tell you.'

'The story does you credit, sir; and I honour you for your goodness,' said Gilbert Fenton.

'Goodness, pshaw!' cried the Captain impetuously; 'it has been a mere matter of self-indulgence on my part. The child made herself necessary to me from the very first. I was a solitary man, a confirmed bachelor, with every prospect of becoming a hard selfish old fogey. Marian Nowell has been the sunshine of my life!'

'You never made any farther discoveries about Mr. Nowell?'

'Never. I have sometimes thought, that I ought to have made some stronger efforts to place myself in communication with him. I have thought this, especially when brooding upon the uncertainties of my darling's future. From the little Mrs. Nowell told me about her marriage, I had reason to believe her husband's father must have been a rich man. He might have softened towards his grandchild, in spite of his disapproval of the marriage. I sometimes think that I ought to have sought out the grandfather. But, you see, it would have been uncommonly difficult to

set about this, in my complete ignorance as to who or what he was.'

'Very difficult. And if you had found him, the chances are that he would have set his face against the child. Marian Nowell will have no need to supplicate for protection from an indifferent father or a hard-hearted grandfather, if she will be my wife.'

'Heaven grant that she may love you as you deserve to be loved by her!' Captain Sedgewick answered heartily.

He thought it would be the best thing that could happen to his darling to become this young man's wife, and he had a notion that a simple inexperienced girl could scarcely help responding to the hopes of such a lover. To his mind Gilbert Fenton seemed eminently adapted to win a woman's heart. He forgot the fatality that belongs to these things, and that a man may have every good gift, and yet just miss the magic power to touch one woman's heart.

CHAPTER III.

ACCEPTED.

MR. FENTON lingered another week at Lidford, with imminent peril to the safe conduct of affairs at his offices in Great St. Helens. He could not tear himself away just yet. He felt that he must have some more definite understanding of his position before he went back to London ; and in the mean time he pondered with a dangerous delight upon that sunny vision of a suburban villa to which Marian should welcome him when his day's work was done.

He went every day to the cottage, and he bore himself in no manner like a rejected lover. He was indeed very hopeful as to the issue of his wooing. He knew that Marian Nowell's heart was free, that there was no rival image to be displaced before his own could reign there, and he thought that it must go hard with him if he did not win her love.

So Marian saw him every day, and had to listen to the Captain's praises of him pretty frequently during his absence. And Captain Sedgewick's talk about Gilbert Fenton generally closed with a regretful sigh, the meaning of which had grown very clear to Marian.

She thought about her uncle's words and looks and sighs a good deal in the quiet of her own room. What was there she would not do for the love of that dearest and noblest of men? Marry a man she disliked? No, that was a sin from which the girl's pure mind would have recoiled instinctively. But she did like Gilbert Fenton—loved him perhaps—though she had never confessed as much to herself.

This calm friendship might really be love after all; not quite such love as she had read of in novels and poems, where the passion was always rendered desperate by the opposing influence of adverse circumstances and unkind kindred; but a tranquil sentiment, a dull, slow, smouldering fire, that needed only some sudden wind of jealousy or misfortune to fan it into a flame.

She knew that his society was pleasant to her, that she would miss him very much when he left

Lidford ; and when she tried to fancy him reconciled to her rejection of him, and returning to London to transfer his affections to some other woman, the thought was very obnoxious to her. He had not flattered her, he had been in no way slavish in his attentions to her ; but he had surrounded her with a kind of atmosphere of love and admiration, the charm of which no girl thus beloved for the first time in her life could be quite proof against.

Thus the story ended, as romances so begun generally do end. There came a summer twilight, when Gilbert Fenton found himself once more upon the dewy lawn under the walnut-trees alone with Marian Nowell. He repeated his appeal in warmer, fonder tones than before, and with a kind of implied certainty that the answer must be a favourable one. It was something like taking the fortress by storm. He had his arm round her slim waist, his lips upon her brow, before she had time to consider what her answer ought to be.

‘ My darling, I cannot live without you ! ’ he said, in a low passionate voice. ‘ Tell me that you love me.’

She disengaged herself gently from his embrace, and stood a little way from him, with shy downcast eyelids.

'I think I do,' she said slowly.

'That is quite enough, Marian!' cried Gilbert joyously. 'I knew you were destined to be my wife!'

He drew her hand through his arm and took her back to the house, where the Captain was sitting in his favourite arm-chair by the window, with a reading-lamp on the little table by his side, and the *Times* newspaper in his hand.

'Your niece has brought you a nephew, sir,' said Gilbert.

The Captain threw aside his paper, and stretched out both his hands to the young man.

'My dear boy, I cannot tell you how happy this makes me!' he cried. 'Didn't I promise you that all would go well if you were patient? My little girl is wise enough to know the value of a good man's love.'

'I am very grateful, uncle George,' faltered Marian, taking shelter behind the Captain's chair; 'only I don't feel that I am worthy of so much thought.'

'Nonsense, child; not worthy! You are the best girl in Christendom, and will make the brightest and truest wife that ever made a man's home dear to him.'

The evening went on very happily after that: Marian at the piano, playing plaintive dreamy melodies with a tender expressive touch; Gilbert sitting close at hand, watching the face he loved so dearly—an evening in paradise, as it seemed to Mr. Fenton. He went homewards in the moonlight a little before eleven o'clock, thinking of his new happiness—such perfect happiness, without a cloud. The bright suburban villa was no longer an airy castle, perhaps never to be realised; it was a delightful certainty. He began to speculate as to the number of months that must needs pass before he could make Marian his wife. There was no reason for delay. He was well-off, his own master, and it was only her will that could hinder the speedy realisation of that sweet domestic dream which had haunted him lately.

He told his sister what had happened next morning, when Martin Lister had left the breakfast-table to hold audience with his farm-bailiff, and those two were together alone. He was a

little tired of having his visits to the cottage criticised in Mrs. Lister's somewhat supercilious manner, and was very glad to be able to announce that Marian Nowell was to be his wife.

'Well, Gilbert,' exclaimed the matron, after receiving his tidings with tightly-closed lips and a generally antagonistic demeanour, 'I can only say, that if you must marry at all—and I am sure I thought you had quite settled down as a bachelor, with your excellent lodgings in Wigmore-street, and every possible comfort in life—I think you might have chosen much better than this. Of course I don't want to be rude or unpleasant; but I cannot help saying, that I consider any man a fool who allows himself to be captivated by a pretty face.'

'I have found a great deal more than a pretty face to admire in Marian Nowell.'

'Indeed! Can you name any other advantages which she possesses?'

'Amiability, good sense, and a pure and refined nature.'

'What warrant have you for all those things? Mind, Gilbert, I like the girl well enough; I have nothing to say against her; but I cannot

help thinking it a most unfortunate match for you.'

'How unfortunate?'

'The girl's position is so very doubtful.'

'Position!' echoed Gilbert impatiently. 'That sort of talk is one of the consequences of living in such a place as Lidford. You talk about position, as if I were a prince of the blood-royal, whose marriage would be registered in every almanac in the kingdom.'

'If she were really the Captain's niece, it would be a different thing,' harped Mrs. Lister, without noticing this contemptuous interruption; 'but to marry a girl about whose relations nobody knows anything! I suppose even you have not been told who her father and mother were.'

'I know quite enough about them. Captain Sedgewick has been candour itself upon the subject.'

'And are the father and mother both dead?'

'Miss Nowell's mother has been dead many years.'

'And her father?'

'Captain Sedgewick does not know whether he is dead or living.'

'Ah!' exclaimed Mrs. Lister with a profound sigh; 'I should have thought as much. And you are really going to marry a girl with this disreputable mystery about her belongings?'

'There is nothing either disreputable or mysterious. People are sometimes lost sight of in this world. Mr. Nowell was a bad husband and an indifferent father, and Captain Sedgewick adopted his daughter; that is all.'

'And no doubt, after you are married, this Mr. Nowell will make his appearance some day, and be a burden upon you.'

'I am not afraid of that. And now, Belle, as this is a subject upon which we don't seem very likely to agree, I think we had better drop it. I considered it only right to tell you of my engagement.'

On this his sister softened a little, and promised Gilbert that she would do her best to be kind to Miss Nowell.

'You won't be married for some time to come, of course,' she said.

'I don't know about that, Belle. There is nothing to prevent a speedy marriage.'

'O, surely you will wait a twelvemonth, at

least. You have known Marian Nowell such a short time. You ought to put her to the test in some manner before you make her your wife.'

'I have no occasion to put her to any kind of test. I have a most profound and perfect belief in her goodness.'

'Why, Gilbert, this is utter infatuation—about a girl whom you have only known a little more than three weeks!'

It does seem difficult for a matter-of-fact, reasonable matron, whose romantic experiences are things of the remote past, to understand this sudden trust in, and all-absorbing love for, an acquaintance of a brief summer holiday. But Gilbert Fenton believed implicitly in his own instinct, and was not to be shaken.

He went back to town by the afternoon express that day, for he dared not delay his return any longer. He went back regretfully enough to the dryasdust business life, after spending the greater part of the morning under the walnut-trees in Captain Sedgewick's garden, playing with Fritz the Skye terrier, and talking airy nonsense to Marian, while she sat in a garden-chair hemming silk handkerchiefs for her uncle, and look-

ing distractingly pretty in a print morning dress with tiny pink rosebuds on a white ground, and a knot of pink ribbon fastening the dainty collar. He ventured to talk a little about the future too ; painting, with all the enthusiasm of Claude Melnotte, and a great deal more sincerity, the home which he meant to create for her.

‘ You will have to come to town to choose our house, you know, Marian,’ he said, after a glowing description of such a villa as never yet existed, except in the florid imagination of an auctioneer ; ‘ I could never venture upon such an important step without you : apart from all sentimental considerations, a woman’s judgment is indispensable in these matters. The house might be perfection in every other point, and there might be no boiler, or no butler’s pantry, or no cupboard for brooms on the landing, or some irremediable omission of that kind. Yes, Marian, your uncle must bring you to town for a week or so of house-hunting, and soon.’

She looked at him with a startled expression.

‘ Soon !’ she repeated.

‘ Yes, dear, very soon. There is nothing in

the world to hinder our marriage. Why should we delay longer than to make all necessary arrangements? I long so for my new home, Marian. I have never had a home in my life since I was a boy.'

'O Mr. Fenton—Gilbert,'—she pronounced his Christian name shyly, and in obedience to his reproachful look,—'remember how short a time we have known each other. It is much too soon to talk or think of marriage yet. I want you to have plenty of leisure to consider whether you really care for me, whether it isn't only a fancy that will die out when you go back to London. And we ought to have time to know each other very well, Gilbert, to be quite sure we are suited to one another.'

This seemed an echo of his sister's reasoning, and vexed him a little.

'Have *you* any fear that we shall not suit each other, Marian?' he asked anxiously.

'I know that you are only too good for me,' she answered. Upon which Gilbert hindered the hemming of the Captain's handkerchiefs by stooping down to kiss the little hands at work upon them. And then the talk drifted back to easier

subjects, and he did not again press that question as to the date of the marriage.

At last the time came for going to the station. He had arranged for Mr. Lister's gig to call for him at the cottage, so that he might spend every possible moment with Marian. And at three o'clock the gig appeared, driven by Martin Lister himself, and Gilbert was fain to say good-bye. His last lingering backward glance showed him the white figure under the walnut-trees, and a little hand waving farewell.

How empty and dreary his comfortable bachelor lodgings seemed to him that night when he had dined, and sat by the open window smoking his solitary cigar, listening to the dismal street-noises, and the monotonous roll of ceaseless wheels yonder in Oxford-street; not caring to go out to his club, caring still less for opera or theatre, or any of the old ways whereby he had been wont to dispose of his evenings!

His mind was full of Marian Nowell. All that was grave and earnest in his nature gave force to this his first love. He had had flirtations in the past, of course; but they had been no more than flirtations, and at thirty his heart was as

fresh and inexperienced as a boy's. It pleased him to think of Marian's lonely position. Better, a hundred times better, that she should be thus, than fettered by ties which might come between them and perfect union. The faithful and generous protector of her childhood would of necessity always claim her love ; but beyond this one affection, she would be Gilbert's, and Gilbert's only. There would be no mother, no sisters, to absorb her time and distract her thoughts from her husband, perhaps prejudice her against him. Domestic life for those two must needs be free from all the petty jars, the overshadowing clouds no bigger than a man's hand, forerunners of tempest, which Mr. Fenton had heard of in many households.

He was never weary of thinking about that life which was to be. Everything else he thought of was now considered only in relation to that one subject. He applied himself to business with a new ardour ; never before had he been so anxious to grow rich.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN SALTRAM.

THE offices of Fenton and Co. in Great St. Helens were handsome, prosperous-looking premises, consisting of two large outer rooms, where half-a-dozen indefatigable clerks sat upon high stools before ponderous mahogany desks, and wrote industriously all day long; and an inner and smaller apartment, where there was a faded Turkey-carpet instead of the kamptulicon that covered the floor of the outer offices, a couple of spacious, red-morocco-covered arm-chairs, and a desk of substantial and somewhat legal design, on which Gilbert Fenton was wont to write the more important letters of the house. In all the offices there were iron safes, which gave one a notion of limitless wealth stored away in the shape of bonds and bills, if not actual gold and bank-notes; and upon all the walls there were coloured and uncoloured engravings of ships framed and glazed,

and catalogues of merchandise that had been sold, or was to be sold, hanging loosely one on the other. Besides these, there were a great many of those flimsy papers that record the state of things on 'Change, hanging here and there on the brass rails of the desks, from little hooks in the walls, and in any other available spot. And in all the premises there was an air of business and prosperity, which seemed to denote that Fenton and Co. were travelling at a rapid pace on the high-road to fortune.

Gilbert Fenton sat in the inner office at noon one day about a week after his return from Liddford. He had come to business early that morning, had initialed a good many accounts, and written half-a-dozen letters already, and had thrown himself back in his easy-chair for a few minutes' idle musing—musing upon that one sweet dream of his new existence, of course. From whatever point his thoughts started, they always drifted into that channel.

While he was sitting like this, with his hands in his pockets and his chair tilted upon its hind legs, the half-glass door opened, and a gentleman came into the office—a man a little over

middle height, broad-shouldered, and powerfully built, with a naturally dark complexion, which had been tanned still darker by sun and wind, black eyes and heavy black eyebrows, a head a little bald at the top, and a face that might have been called almost ugly but for the look of intellectual power in the broad open forehead and the perfect modelling of the flexible sensitive mouth ; a remarkable face altogether, not easily to be forgotten by those who had once looked upon it.

This man was John Saltram, the one intimate and chosen friend of Gilbert Fenton's youth and manhood. They had met first at Oxford, and had seldom lost sight of each other since the old university days. They had travelled a good deal together during the one idle year that had preceded Gilbert's sudden plunge into commerce. They had been up the Nile together in the course of these wanderings ; and here, remote from all civilised aid, Gilbert had fallen ill of a fever—a long tedious business, which brought him to the very point of death, and throughout which John Saltram had nursed him with a womanly tenderness and devotion that knew no abatement. If

this had been wanting to strengthen the tie between them—which it was not—it would have brought them closer together. As it was, that dreary time of sickness and peril was only a memory which Gilbert Fenton kept in his heart of hearts, never to grow less sacred to him until the end of life.

Mr. Saltram was a barrister, almost a briefless one at present, for his habits were desultory, not to say idle, and he had not taken very kindly to the slow drudgery of the Bar. He had some money of his own, and added to his income by writing for the press in a powerful trenchant manner, with a style that was like the stroke of a sledge-hammer. In spite of this literary work, for which he got very well paid, Mr. Saltram generally contrived to be in debt; and there were few periods of his life in which he was not engaged more or less in the delicate operation of raising money by bills of accommodation. Habit had given him quite an artistic touch for this kind of thing, and he did his work fondly, like some enthusiastic horticulturist who gives his anxious days to the budding forth of some new orchid or the production of a hitherto unobtain-

able tulip. It is doubtful whether money procured from any other source was ever half so sweet to this gentleman as the cash for which he paid sixty per cent to the Jews. With these proclivities he managed to rub on from year to year somehow, getting about five hundred per annum in solid value out of an income of seven, and adding a little annually to the rolling mass of debt which he had begun to accumulate while he was at Balliol.

'Why, Jack,' cried Gilbert, starting up from his reverie at the entrance of his friend, and greeting him with a hearty handshaking, 'this is an agreeable surprise! I was asking for you at the Pnyx last night, and Joe Hawdon told me you were away—up the Danube he thought, on a canoe expedition.'

'It is only under some utterly impossible dispensation that Joseph Hawdon will ever be right about anything. I have been on a walking expedition in Brittany, dear boy, alone, and have found myself very bad company. I started soon after you went to your sister's, and only came back last night. That scoundrel Levison promised me seventy-five this afternoon; but whether I shall

get it out of him is a fact only known to himself and the powers with which he holds communion. And was the rustic business pleasant, Gil? Did you take kindly to the syllabubs and new milk, the summer sunrise over dewy fields, the pretty dairy-maids, and prize-pigs, and daily inspections of the home-farm? or did you find life rather dull down at Lidford? I know the place well enough, and all the country round about there. I have stayed at Heatherly with Sir David Forster more than once for the shooting season. A pleasant fellow Forster, in a dissipated good-for-nothing kind of way, always up to his eyes in debt. Did you happen to meet him while you were down there?

‘No, I don’t think the Listers know him.’

‘So much the better for them! It is a vice to know him. And you were not dull at Lidford?’

‘Very far from it, Jack. I was happier there than I have ever been in my life before.’

‘Eh, Gil!’ cried John Saltram; ‘that means something more than a quiet fortnight with a married sister. Come, old fellow, I have a vested right to a share in all your secrets.’

‘There is no secret, Jack. Yes, I have fallen

in love, if that's what you mean, and am engaged.'

'So soon! That's rather quick work, isn't it, dear boy?'

'I don't think so. What is that the poet says?—"If not an Adam at his birth, he is no love at all." My passion sprang into life full-grown after an hour's contemplation of a beautiful face in Lidford church.'

'Who is the lady?'

'O, her position is not worth speaking of. She is the adopted niece of a half-pay captain—an orphan, without money or connections.'

'Humph!' muttered John Saltram with the privileged candour of friendship; 'not a very advantageous match for you, Gilbert, from a worldly point of view.'

'I have not considered the matter from that point of view.'

'And the lady is all that is charming, of course?'

'To my mind, yes.'

'Very young?'

'Nineteen.'

'Well, dear old fellow, I wish you joy with all

heartiness. You can afford to marry whom you please, and are very right to let inclination and not interest govern your choice. Whenever *I* tie myself in the bondage of matrimony, it will be to a lady who can pay my debts and set me on my legs for life. Whether such a one will ever consider my ugly face a fair equivalent for her specie, is an open question. You must introduce me to your future wife, Gilbert, on the first opportunity. I shall be very anxious to discover whether your marriage will be likely to put an end to our friendship.'

'There is no fear of that, Jack. That is a contingency never to arise. I have told Marian a great deal about you already. She knows that I owe my life to you, and she is prepared to value you as much as I do.'

'She is very good ; but all wives promise that kind of thing before marriage. And there is apt to come a day when the familiar bachelor friend falls under the domestic taboo, together with smoking in the drawing-room, brandy-and-soda, and other luxuries of the old, easy-going, single life.'

'Marian is not very likely to prove a domestic

tyrant. She is the gentlest dearest girl, and is very well used to bachelor habits in the person of her uncle. I don't believe she will ever extinguish our cigars, Jack, even in the drawing-room. I look forward to the happiest home that ever a man possessed ; and it would be no home of mine if you were not welcome and honoured in it. I hope we shall spend many a summer evening on the lawn, Jack, with a bottle of Pomard or St. Julien between us, watching the drowsy old anglers in their punts, and the swift outriggers flashing past in the twilight. I mean to find some snug little place by the river, you know, Saltram—somewhere about Teddington, where the gardens slope down to the water's edge.'

' Very pleasant ! and you will make an admirable family man, Gil. You have none of the faults that render me ineligible for the married state. I think your Marian is a very fortunate girl. What is her surname, by the way ?'

' Nowell.'

' Marian Nowell—a very pretty name ! When do you think of going back to Lidford ?'

' In about a month. My brother-in-law wants me to go back to them for the 1st of September.'

‘Then I think I shall run down to Forster’s, and have a pop at the pheasants. It will give me an opportunity of being presented to Miss Nowell.’

‘I shall be very pleased to introduce you, old fellow. I know that you will admire her.’

‘Well, I am not a very warm admirer of the sex in general ; but I am sure to like your future wife, Gil, if it is only because you have chosen her.’

‘And your own affairs, Jack—how have they been going on ?’

‘Not very brightly. I am not a lucky individual, you know. Destiny and I have been at odds ever since I was a schoolboy.’

‘Not in love yet, John ?’

‘No,’ the other answered, with rather a gloomy look.

He was sitting on a corner of the ponderous desk in a lounging attitude, gazing meditatively at his boots, and hitting one of them now and then with a cane he carried, in a restless kind of way.

‘You see, the fact of the matter is, Gil,’ he began at last, ‘as I told you just now, if ever I do marry, mercenary considerations are likely to be at the bottom of the business. I don’t mean

to say that I would marry a woman I disliked, and take it out of her in ill-usage or neglect. I am not quite such a scoundrel as that. But if I had the luck to meet with a woman I *could* like, tolerably pretty and agreeable, and all that kind of thing, and weak enough to care for me—a woman with a handsome fortune—I should be a fool not to snap at such a chance.'

'I see,' exclaimed Gilbert; 'you have met with such a woman.'

'I have.'

Again the gloomy look came over the dark strongly-marked face, the thick black eyebrows contracted in a frown, and the cane was struck impatiently against John Saltram's boot.

'But you are not in love with her; I can see that in your face, Jack. You'll think me a sentimental fool, I daresay, and fancy I look at things in a new light now that I'm down a pit myself; but, for God's sake, don't marry a woman you can't love. Tolerably pretty and agreeable won't do, Jack,—that means indifference on your part; and, depend upon it, when a man and woman are tied together for life, there is only a short step from indifference to dislike.'

'No, Gilbert, it's not that,' answered the other, still moodily contemplative of his boots. 'I really like the lady well enough—love her, I daresay. I have not had much experience of the tender passion since I was jilted by an Oxford barmaid—whom I would have married, by Jove. But the truth is, the lady in question isn't free to marry just yet. There's a husband in the case—a feeble old Anglo-Indian, who can't live very long. Don't look so glum, old fellow; there has been nothing wrong, not a word that all the world might not hear; but there are signs and tokens by which a man, without any vanity—and heaven knows I have no justification for that—may be sure a woman likes him. In short, I believe that if Adela Branston were a widow, the course would lie clear before me, and I should have nothing to do but go in and win. And the stakes will be worth winning, I assure you.'

'But this Mr. Branston may live for an indefinite number of years, during which you will be wasting your life on a shadow.'

'Not very likely. Poor old Branston came home from Calcutta a confirmed invalid, and I believe his sentence has been pronounced by all

the doctors. In the mean time he makes the best of life, has his good days and bad days, and entertains a great deal of company at a delightful place near Maidenhead—with a garden sloping to the river like that you were talking of just now, only on a very extensive scale. You know how often I have wanted you to run down there with me, and how there has been always something to prevent your going.'

'Yes, I remember. Rely upon it, I shall contrive to accept the next invitation, come what may. But I can't say I like the idea of this prospective kind of courtship, or that I consider it quite worthy of you, Saltram.'

'My dear Gilbert, when a fellow is burdened with debt and of a naturally idle disposition, he is apt to take rather a liberal view of such means of advancement in life as may present themselves to him. But there is no prospective courtship—nothing at all resembling a courtship in this case, believe me. Mrs. Branston knows that I like and admire her. She knows as much of almost every man who goes to Rivercombe; for there are plenty who will be disposed to go in against me for the prize by and by. But I think

that she likes me better than any one else, and that the chances will be all in my favour. From first to last there has not been a word spoken between us which old Branston himself might not hear. As to Adela's marrying again when he is gone, he could scarcely be so fatuous as not to foresee the probability of that.'

'Is she pretty?'

'Very pretty, in rather a childish way, with blue eyes and fair hair. She is not my ideal among women, but no man ever marries his ideal. The man who has sworn by eyes as black as a stormy midnight and raven hair generally unites himself to the most insipid thing in blondes, and the idolater of golden locks takes to wife some frizzy-haired West-Indian with an unmistakable dip of the tar-brush. When will you go down to Rivercombe?'

'Whenever you like.'

'The nabob is hospitality itself, and will be delighted to see you, if he is to the fore when you go. I fancy there is some kind of regatta—a race or two, at any rate—on Saturday afternoon. Will that suit you?'

'Very well indeed.'

'Then we can meet at the station. There is a train down at 2.15. But we are going to see something of each other in the mean time, I hope. I know that I am a sore hindrance to business at such an hour as this. Will you dine with me at the Pnyx at seven to-night? I shall be able to tell you how I got on with Levison.'

'With pleasure.'

And so they parted—Gilbert Fenton to return to his letter-writing, and to the reception of callers of a more commercial and profitable character; John Saltram to loiter slowly through the streets on his way to the money-lender's office.

They dined together very pleasantly that evening. Mr. Levison had proved accommodating for the nonce; and John Saltram was in high spirits, almost boisterously gay, with the gaiety of a man for whom life is made up of swift transitions from brightness to gloom, long intervals of despondency, and brief glimpses of pleasure; the reckless humour of a man with whom thought always meant care, and whose soul had no higher aspiration than to beguile the march of time by such evenings as these.

They met on the following Saturday at the

Great Western terminus, John Saltram still in high spirits, and Gilbert Fenton quietly happy. That morning's post had brought him his first letter from Marian—an innocent girlish epistle, which was as delicious to Gilbert as if it had been the *chef-d'œuvre* of a Sévigné. What could she say to him? Very little. The letter was full of gratitude for his thoughtfulness about her, for the pretty tributes of his love which he had sent her, the books and music and ribbons and gloves, in the purchase whereof he had found such a novel pleasure. It had been a common thing for him to execute such commissions for his sister; but it was quite a new sensation to him to discuss the colours of gloves and ribbons, now that the trifles he chose were to give pleasure to Marian Nowell. He knew every tint that harmonised or contrasted best with that clear olive complexion—the brilliant blue that gave new brightness to the sparkling gray eyes, the pink that cast warm lights upon the firmly-moulded throat and chin—and he found a childish delight in these trivialities. There was one ribbon he selected for her at this time which he had strange reason to remember in the days to come—a narrow blue ribbon with tiny pink

rosebuds upon it, a daring mixture of the two colours.

He had the letter in the breast-pocket of his coat when he met John Saltram at the station, and entertained that gentleman with certain passages from it as they sped down to Maidenhead. To which passages Mr. Saltram listened kindly, with a very vague notion of the writer.

'I am afraid she is rather a namby-pamby person,' he thought, 'with nothing but her beauty to recommend her. That wonderful gift of beauty has such power to bewitch the most sensible man upon occasion.'

They chartered a fly at Maidenhead, and drove about a mile and a half along a pleasant road before they came to the gates of Rivercombe—a low straggling house with verandahs, over which trailed a wealth of flowering creepers, and innumerable windows opening to the ground. The gardens were perfection; not gardens of yesterday, with only the prim splendours of modern horticulture to recommend them, but spreading lawns, on which the deep springy turf had been growing a hundred years—lawns made delicious in summer time by the cool umbrage of old forest-trees; fertile rose-

gardens screened from the biting of adverse winds by tall hedges of holly and yew, the angles whereof were embellished by vases and peacocks quaintly cut in the style of a bygone age ; and, for chief glory of all, the bright blue river, which made the principal boundary of the place, washing the edge of the wide sloping lawn, and making perpetual music on a summer day with its joyous ripple.

There was a good deal of company already scattered about the lawn when John Saltram and his friend were ushered into the pretty drawing-room. The cheerful sound of croquet-balls came from a level stretch of grass visible from the windows, and quite a little fleet of boats were jostling one another at the landing by the Swiss boathouse.

Mrs. Brandon came in from the garden to welcome them, looking very pretty in a coquettish little white-chip hat with a scarlet feather, and a pale-gray silk dress looped up over an elaborately-flounced muslin petticoat. She was a slender little woman, with a brilliant complexion, sunny waving hair, and innocent blue eyes ; the sort of woman whom a man would wish to shelter from all the storms of life, but whom he might scarcely

care to choose for the companion of a perilous voyage.

She professed herself very much pleased to see Gilbert Fenton.

'I have heard so much of you from Mr. Saltram,' she said. 'He is always praising you. I believe he cares more for you than any one else in the world.'

'I have not many people to care for,' answered John Saltram, 'and Gilbert is a friend of long standing.'

A sentimental expression came over Mrs. Branston's girlish face, and she gave a little regretful sigh.

'I am sorry you will not see my husband to-day,' she said, after a brief pause. 'It is one of his bad days.'

The two gentlemen both expressed their regret upon this subject; and then they went out to the lawn with Mrs. Branston and joined the group by the river-brink, who were waiting for the race. Here Gilbert found some pleasant people to talk to; while Adela Branston and John Saltram strolled, as if by accident, to a seat a little way apart from the rest, and sat there talking in a confidential

manner, which might not really constitute a flirtation, but which had rather that appearance to the eye of the ignorant observer.

The boats came flashing by at last, and there was the usual excitement amongst the spectators ; but it seemed to Gilbert that Mrs. Branston found more interest in John Saltram's conversation than in the race. It is possible she had seen too many such contests to care much for the result of this one. She scarcely looked up as the boats shot by, but sat with her little gloved hands clasped upon her knee, and her bright face turned towards John Saltram.

They all went into the house at about seven o'clock, after a good deal of croquet and flirtation, and found a free-and-easy kind of banquet, half tea, half luncheon, but very substantial after its kind, waiting for them in the long low dining-room. Mrs. Branston was very popular as a hostess, and had a knack of bringing pleasant people round her—journalists and musical men, clever young painters who were beginning to make their mark in the art-world, pretty girls who could sing or play well, or talk more or less brilliantly. Against nonentities of all kinds Adela Branston

set her face, and had a polite way of dropping people from whom she derived no amusement, pleading in her pretty childish way that it was so much more pleasant for all parties. That this mundane existence of ours was not intended to be all pleasure, was an idea that never yet troubled Adela Branston's mind. She had been petted and spoiled by every one about her from the beginning of her brief life, and had passed from the frivolous career of a schoolgirl to a position of wealth and independence as Michael Branston's wife; fully believing that, in making the sacrifice involved in marrying a man forty years her senior, she earned the right to take her own pleasure, and to gratify every caprice of her infantile mind, for the remainder of her days. She was supremely selfish in an agreeable unconscious fashion, and considered herself a domestic martyr whenever she spent an hour in her husband's sick-room, listening to his peevish accounts of his maladies, or reading a *Times* leader on the threatening aspect of things in the City for the solace of his loneliness and pain.

The popping of corks sounded merrily amidst the buzz of conversation, and great antique silver

tankards of Badminton and Moselle cup were emptied as by magic, none knowing how except the grave judicial-looking butler, whose omniscient eye reigned above the pleasant confusion of the scene. And after about an hour and a half wasted in this agreeable indoor picnic, Mrs. Branston and her friends adjourned to the drawing-room, where the grand piano had been pushed into a conspicuous position, and where the musical business of the evening speedily began.

It was very pleasant sitting by the open windows in the summer twilight, with no artificial light in the room except the wax-candles on the piano, listening to good music, and talking a little now and then in that subdued confidential tone to which music makes such an agreeable accompaniment.

Adela Branston sat in the midst of a group in a wide bay-window, and although John Saltram was standing near her chair, he did not this time engage the whole of her attention. Gilbert found himself seated next a very animated young lady, who rather bored him with her raptures about the music, and who seemed to have assisted at every morning and evening concert that had been given

within the last two years. To any remoter period her memory did not extend, and she implied that she had been before that time in a chrysalis or non-existent condition. She told Mr. Fenton, with an air of innocent wonder, that she had heard there were people living who remembered the first appearance of Jenny Lind.

A little before ten o'clock there was a general movement for the rail, the greater number of Mrs. Branston's guests having come from town. There was a scarcity of flys at this juncture, so John Saltram and Gilbert Fenton walked back to the station in the moonlight.

'Well, Gilbert, old fellow, what do you think of the lady?' Mr. Saltram asked, when they were a little way beyond the gates of Rivercombe.

'I think her very pretty, Jack, and—well—yes—upon the whole fascinating. But I don't like the look of the thing altogether, and I fancy there's considerable bad taste in giving parties with an invalid husband upstairs. I was wondering how Mr. Branston liked the noise of all that talk and laughter in the dining-room, or the music that came afterwards.'

'My dear fellow, old Branston delights in so-

cietty. He is generally well enough to sit in the drawing-room and look on at his wife's parties. He doesn't talk much on those occasions. Indeed, I believe he is quite incapable of conversing about anything except the rise and fall of Indian stock, or the fluctuations in the value of indigo. And, you see, Adela married him with the intention of enjoying her life. She confesses as much sometimes with perfect candour.'

'I daresay she is very candid, and just as shallow,' said Gilbert Fenton, who was inclined to set his face against this entanglement of his friend's.

'Well—yes, I suppose she is rather shallow. Those pretty pleasant little women generally are, I think. Depth of feeling and force of mind are so apt to go along with blue spectacles and a rugged aspect. A woman's prettiness must stand for something. There is so much real pleasure in the contemplation of a charming face, that a man had need rescind a little in the way of mental qualifications. And I do not think Adela Branston is without a heart.'

'You praise her very warmly. Are you really in love with her, John?' his friend asked seriously.

'No, Gilbert, upon my honour. I heartily wish I were. I wish I could give her more by and by, when death brings about her release from Michael Branston, than the kind of liking I feel for her. No, I am not in love with her; but I think she likes me, and a man must be something worse than a brute if he is not grateful for a pretty woman's regard.'

They said no more about Mrs. Branston. Gilbert had a strong distaste for the business; but he did not care to take upon himself the office of mentor to a friend whose will he knew to be much stronger than his own, and to whose domination he had been apt to submit in most things as to the influence of a superior mind. It disappointed him a little to find that John Saltram was capable of making a mercenary marriage, capable even of the greater baseness involved in the anticipation of a dead man's shoes; but his heart was not easily to be turned against the chosen friend of his youth, and he was prompt in making excuses for the line of conduct he disapproved.

CHAPTER V.

HALCYON DAYS.

IT was still quite early in September when Gilbert Fenton went back to Lidford, and took up his quarters once more in the airy chintz-curtained bedchamber set apart for him in his sister's house. He had devoted himself very resolutely to business during the interval that had gone by since his last visit to that quiet country house; but the time had seemed very long to him, and he fancied himself a kind of martyr to the necessities of commerce. The aspect of his affairs of late had not been quite free from unpleasantness. There were difficulties in the conduct of business in the Melbourne branch of the house, that branch which was under the charge of a cousin of Gilbert's, about whose business capacities the late Mr. Fenton had entertained the most exalted opinion.

The Melbourne trading had not of late done much credit to this gentleman's commercial genius.

He had put his trust in firms that had crumbled to pieces before the bills drawn upon them came due, involving his cousin in considerable losses. Gilbert was rich enough to stand these losses, however ; and he reconciled himself to them as best he might, taking care to send his Australian partner imperative instructions for a more prudent system of trading in the future.

The uneasiness and vexation produced by this business was still upon him when he went down to Lidford ; but he relied upon Marian Nowell's presence to dissipate all his care.

He did find himself perfectly happy in her society. He was troubled by no doubts as to her affection for him, no uncertainty as to the brightness of the days that were to come. Her manner seemed to him all that a man could wish in the future partner of his life. An innocent trustfulness in his superior judgment, a childlike submission to his will which Marian displayed upon all occasions, were alike flattering and delightful. Nor did she ever appear to grow tired of that talk of their future which was so pleasant to her lover. There was no shadow of doubt upon her face when he spoke of the serene happiness which they two

were to find in an existence spent together. He was the first who had ever spoken to her of these things, and she listened to him with an utter simplicity and freshness of mind.

Time had reconciled Isabella Lister to her brother's choice, and she now deigned to smile upon the lovers, very much to Gilbert's satisfaction. He had been too proud to supplicate her good graces ; but he was pleased that his only sister should show herself gracious and affectionate to the girl he loved so fondly. During this second visit of his, therefore, Marian came very often to Lidford House ; sometimes accompanied by her uncle, sometimes alone ; and there was perfect harmony between the elder and younger lady.

The pheasants upon Martin Lister's estate did not suffer much damage from his brother-in-law's gun that autumn. Gilbert found it a great deal pleasanter to spend his mornings dawdling in the little cottage drawing-room or under the walnut-trees with Marian, than to waste his noontide hours in the endeavour to fill a creditable game-bag. There is not very much to tell of the hours which those two spent together so happily. It was an innocent, frivolous, useless employment of time,

and left little trace behind it, except in the heart of one of those two. Gilbert wondered at himself when, in some sober interval of reflection, he happened to consider those idle mornings, those tranquil uneventful afternoons and evenings, remembering what a devoted man of business he had once been, and how a few months ago he would have denounced such a life in another.

'Well,' he said to himself, with a happy laugh, 'a man can take this fever but once in his life, and it is only wise in him to surrender himself utterly to the divine delirium. I shall have no excuse for neglecting business by and by, when my little wife and I are settled down together for the rest of our days. Let me be her lover while I may. Can I ever be less than her lover, I wonder? Will marriage, or custom, or the assurance that we belong to each other for the rest of our days, take the poetry out of our lives? I think not; I think Marian must always be to me what she has seemed to me from the very first—something better and brighter than the common things of this life.'

Custom, which made Marian Nowell dearer to Gilbert Fenton every day, had by this time famil-

iarised her with his position as her future husband. She was no longer surprised or distressed when he pleaded for a short engagement, and a speedy realisation of that Utopian home which they were to inhabit together. The knowledge of her uncle's delight in this engagement of hers might have reconciled her to it, even if she had not loved Gilbert Fenton. And she told herself that she did love him; or, more often putting the matter in the form of a question, asked herself whether she could be so basely ungrateful as not to love one who regarded her with such disinterested affection?

It was settled finally, after a good deal of pleasant discussion, that the wedding should take place early in the coming spring—at latest in April. Even this seemed a long delay to Gilbert; but he submitted to it as an inevitable concession to the superior instinct of his betrothed, which harmonised so well with Mrs. Lister's ideas of wisdom and propriety. There was the house to be secured too, so that he might have a fitting home to which to take his darling when their honeymoon was over; and as he had no female relation in London who could take the care of furnishing this earthly

paradise off his hands, he felt that the whole business must devolve upon himself, and could not be done without time.

Captain Sedgewick promised to bring Marian to town for a fortnight in October, in order that she might assist her lover in that delightful duty of house-hunting. She looked forward to this visit with quite a childlike pleasure. Her life at Lidford had been completely happy; but it was a monotonous kind of happiness; and the notion of going about London, even at the dullest time of the year, was very delightful to her.

The weather happened to be especially fine that September. It was the brightest month of the year, and the lovers took long rambles together in the woodland roads and lanes about Lidford, sometimes alone, more often with the Captain, who was a very fair pedestrian, in spite of having had a bullet or two through his legs in the days gone by. When the weather was too warm for walking, Gilbert borrowed Martin Lister's dog-cart, and drove them on long journeys of exploration to remote villages, or to the cheery little market-town ten miles away.

They all three set out for a walk one after-

noon, when Gilbert had been about a fortnight at Lidford, with no particular destination, only bent on enjoying the lovely weather and the rustic beauty of woodland and meadow. The Captain chose their route, as he always did on these occasions, and under his guidance they followed the river-bank for some distance, and then turned aside into a wood in which Gilbert Fenton had never been before. He said so, with an expression of surprise at the beauty of the place, where the fern grew deep under giant oaks and beeches, and where the mossy ground dipped suddenly down to a deep still pool which reflected the sunlit sky through a break in the dark foliage that sheltered it.

‘What, have you never been here?’ exclaimed the Captain; ‘then you have never seen Heatherly, I suppose?’

‘Never. By the way, is not that Sir David Forster’s place?’ asked Gilbert, remembering John Saltram’s promise.

He had seen very little more of his friend after that visit to Rivercombe, and had half forgotten Mr. Saltram’s talk of coming down to this neighbourhood on purpose to be presented to Marian.

'Yes. It is something of a show-place too, and we think a good deal of it in these parts. There are some fine Sir Joshuas among the family portraits, painted in the days when the Forsters were better off and of more importance in the county than they are now. And there are a few other good pictures—Dutch interiors, and some seascapes by BakhuySEN. Decidedly you ought to see Heatherly. Shall we push on there this afternoon ?'

'Is it far from here ?'

'Not much more than a mile. This wood joins the park, and there is a public right of way across the park to the Lidford road, so the gate is always open. We can't waste our walk, and I know Sir David quite well enough to ask him to let you see the pictures, if he should happen to be at home.'

'I should like it of all things,' said Gilbert eagerly. 'My friend John Saltram knows this Sir David Forster, and he talked of being down here at this time ; I forgot all about it till you spoke of Heatherly just now. I have a knack of forgetting things nowadays.'

'I wonder that you should forget anything

connected with Mr. Saltram, Gilbert,' said Marian; ' that Mr. Saltram of whom you think so much. I cannot tell you how anxious I am to see what kind of person he is; not handsome—you have confessed as much as that.'

' Yes, Marian, I admit the painful fact. There are people who call John Saltram ugly. But his face is not a common one; it is a very picturesque kind of ugliness—a face that Velasquez would have loved to paint, I think. It is a rugged, strongly-marked countenance with a villainously-dark complexion; but the eyes are very fine, the mouth perfection; and there is a look of power in the face that, to my mind, is better than beauty.'

' And I think you owned that Mr. Saltram is hardly the most agreeable person in the world.'

' Well no, he is not what one could well call an eminently agreeable person. And yet he exercises a good deal of influence over the men he knows, without admitting many of them to his friendship. He is very clever; not a brilliant talker by any means, except on rare occasions, when he chooses to give full swing to his powers; he does not lay himself out for social successes; but he is a man who seems to know more of every

subject than the men about him. I doubt if he will ever succeed at the Bar. He has so little perseverance or steadiness, and indulges in such an erratic, desultory mode of life ; but he has made his mark in literature already, and I think he might become a great man if he chose. Whether he ever will choose is a doubtful question.'

'I am afraid he must be rather a dissipated, dangerous kind of person,' said Marian.

'Well, yes, he is subject to occasional outbreaks of dissipation. They don't last long, and they seem to leave not the faintest impression upon his herculean constitution ; but of course that sort of thing does more or less injury to a man's mind, however comparatively harmless the form of his dissipation may be. There are very few men whom John Saltram cannot drink under the table, and rise with a steady brain himself when the wassail is ended ; yet I believe, in a general way, few men drink less than he does. At cards he is equally strong ; a past-master in all games of skill ; and the play is apt to be rather high at one or two of the clubs he belongs to. He has a wonderful power of self-restraint when he cares to exert it ; will play six or seven hours

every night for three weeks at a stretch, and then not touch a card for six months. Poor old John,' said Gilbert Fenton, with a half-regretful sigh; 'under happy circumstances, he might be such a good man.'

'But I fear he is a dangerous friend for you, Gilbert,' exclaimed Marian, horrified by this glimpse of a bachelor life.

'No, darling, I have never shared his wilder pleasures. There are a few chosen spirits with whom he consorts at such times. I believe this Sir David Forster is one of them.'

'Sir David has the reputation of leading rather a wild life in London,' said the Captain, 'and of bringing a dissipated set down here every autumn. Things have not gone well with him. His wife, who was a very beautiful girl, and whom he passionately loved, was killed by a fall from her horse a few months after the birth of her first child. The child died too, and the double loss ruined Sir David. He used to spend the greater part of his life at Heatherly, and was a general favourite among the county people; but since that time he has avoided the place, except during the shooting season. He has a hunting-box in the shires,

and is a regular daredevil over a big country they tell me.'

They had reached the little gate opening from the wood into the park by this time. There was not much difference in the aspect of the sylvan scene upon the other side of the fence. Sir David's domain had been a good deal neglected of late years, and the brushwood and brambles grew thick under the noble old trees. The timber had not yet suffered by its owner's improvidence. The end of all things must have come for Sir David before he would have consented to the spoliation of a place he fondly loved, little as he had cared to inhabit it since the day that shattered all that was brightest and best in his life.

For some time Captain Sedgewick and his companions went along a footpath under the shelter of the trees, and then emerged upon a wide stretch of smooth turf, across which they commanded a perfect view of the principal front of the old house. It was a quadrangular building of the Elizabethan period, very plainly built, and with no special beauty to recommend it to the lover of the picturesque. Whatever charm of form it may have possessed in the past had been ruth-

lessly extirpated by the modernisation of the windows, which were now all of one size and form—a long gaunt range of unsheltered casements staring blankly out upon the spectator. There were no flower-beds, no terraced walks, or graceful flights of steps before the house; only a bare grassplot, with a stiff line of tall elms on each side, and a wide dry moat dividing it from the turf in the park. Two lodges—ponderous square brick buildings with very small windows, each the exact counterpart of the other, and a marvel of substantial ugliness—kept guard over a pair of tall iron gates, about six hundred yards apart, approached by stone bridges that spanned the moat.

Captain Sedgewick rang a bell hanging by the side of one of these gates, whereat there arose a shrill peal that set the rooks screaming in the tall elms overhead. An elderly female appeared in answer to this summons, and opened the gate in a slow mechanical way, without the faintest show of interest in the people about to enter, and looking as if she would have admitted a gang of obvious burglars with equal indifference.

‘Rather a hideous style of place,’ said Gilbert

as they walked towards the house ; ‘but I think show-places, as a general rule, excel in ugliness. I daresay the owners of them find a dismal kind of satisfaction in considering the depressing influence their dreary piles of bricks - and - mortar must exercise on the minds of strangers ; it may be a sort of compensation for being obliged to live in such a gaol of a place.’

There was a clumsy low stone portico over the door, wide enough to admit a carriage ; and lounging upon a bench under this stony shelter they found a sleepy-looking man-servant, who informed Captain Sedgewick that Sir David was at Heatherly, but that he was out shooting with his friends at this present moment. In his absence the man would be very happy to show the house to Captain Sedgewick and his party.

Gilbert Fenton asked about John Saltram.

Yes, Mr. Saltram had arrived at Heatherly on Tuesday evening, two nights ago.

They went over the state-rooms, and looked at the pictures, which were really as good as the Captain had represented them. The inspection occupied a little more than an hour, and they were ready to take their departure, when the

sound of masculine voices resounded loudly in the hall, and their conductor announced that Sir David and his friends had come in.

There were only two gentlemen in the hall when they went into that spacious marble-paved chamber, where there were great logs burning on the wide open hearth, in spite of the warmth of the September day. One of these two was Sir David Forster, a big man, with a light-brown beard and a florid complexion. The other was John Saltram, who sat in a lounging attitude on one of the deep window-seats examining his breech-loader. His back was turned towards the window, and the glare of the blazing logs shone full upon his dark face with a strange Rembrandt-like effect.

One glance told Marian Nowell who this man was. That powerful face, with its unfathomable eyes and thoughtful mouth, was not the countenance she had conjured up from the depths of her imagination when Gilbert Fenton had described his friend; yet she felt that this stranger lounging in the window was John Saltram, and no other. He rose, and set down his gun very quietly, and stood by the window waiting while

Captain Sedgewick introduced Gilbert to Sir David. Then he came forward, shook hands with his friend, and was thereupon presented to Marian and her uncle by Gilbert, who made these introductions with a kind of happy eagerness.

Sir David was full of friendliness and hospitality, and insisted on keeping them to show Gilbert and Miss Nowell some pictures in the billiard-room and in his own private snuggeries, apartments which were not shown to ordinary visitors.

They strolled through these rooms in a leisurely way, Sir David taking considerable pains to show Gilbert Fenton the gems of his collection, John Saltram acting as cicerone to Marian. He was curious to discover what this girl was like ; whether she had indeed only her beauty to recommend her, or whether she was in sober reality the perfect being Gilbert Fenton believed her to be.

She was very beautiful. The first brief look convinced Mr. Saltram that upon this point at least her lover had indulged in no loverlike exaggeration. There was a singular charm in the face ; a higher, more penetrating loveliness than mere perfection of feature ; a kind of beauty that

would have been at once the delight and desperation of a painter — so fitting a subject for his brush, so utterly beyond the power of perfect reproduction, unless by one of those happy, almost accidental successes which make the triumphs of genius.

John Saltram watched Marian Nowell's face thoughtfully as he talked to her, for the most part, about the pictures which they were looking at together. Before their inspection of these art-treasures was ended, he was fain to confess to himself that she was intelligent as well as beautiful. It was not that she had said anything particularly brilliant, or had shown herself learned in the qualities of the old Dutch masters; but she possessed that charming childlike capacity for receiving information from a superior mind, and that perfect and rapid power of appreciating a clever man's conversation, which are apt to seem so delightful to the sterner sex when exhibited by a pretty woman. At first she had been just a little shy and constrained in her talk with John Saltram. Her lover's account of this man had not inspired her with any exalted opinion of his character. She was rather inclined to look upon

him as a person to be dreaded, a friend whose influence was dangerous at best, and who might prove the evil genius of Gilbert Fenton's life. But whatever her opinion on this point might remain, her reserve soon melted before John Saltram's clever talk and kindly conciliating manner. He laid himself out to please on this occasion, and it was very rarely he did that without succeeding.

'I want you to think of me as a kind of brother, Miss Nowell,' he said in the course of their talk. 'Gilbert and I have been something like brothers for the last twelve years of our lives, and it would be a hard thing, for one of us at least, if our friendship should ever be lessened. You shall find me discretion itself by and by, and you shall see that I can respect Gilbert's altered position ; but I shouldn't like to lose him, and I don't think you look capable of setting your face against your husband's old friend.'

Marian blushed a little at this, remembering that only an hour or two ago she had been thinking that this friendship was a perilous one for Gilbert, and that it would be well if John Saltram's influence over him could be lessened somehow in the future.

'I don't believe I should ever have the power to diminish Gilbert's regard for you, Mr. Saltram, even were I inclined to do so,' she said.

'O yes, you would; your power over him will be illimitable, depend upon it. But now I have seen you, I think you will only use it wisely.'

Marian shook her head, laughing gaily.

'I am much more fitted to be ruled than to rule, Mr. Saltram,' she said. 'I am utterly inexperienced in the world, you know, and Mr. Fenton is my superior in every way.'

'Your superior in years, I know, but in what else?'

'In everything else. In intellect and judgment, as well as in knowledge of the world. You could never imagine what a quiet changeless life I have led.'

'Your intellect is so much the clearer for that, I think. It has not been disturbed by all the narrow petty influences of a life spent in what is called "society."

Before they left the house, Gilbert and the Captain were obliged to promise to dine at Heatherly next day, very much to the secret distaste of the former, who must thus lose an evening with

Marian, but who was ashamed to reveal his hopeless condition by a persistent refusal. Captain Sedgewick begged John Saltram to choose an early day for dining at the cottage, and Gilbert gave him a general invitation to Lidford House.

These matters being settled, they departed, accompanied by Mr. Saltram, who proposed to walk as far as the wood with them, and who extended his walk still farther, only leaving them at the gate of the Captain's modest domain. The conversation was general throughout the way back; and they all found plenty to talk about, as they loitered slowly on among the waving shadows of the trees flickering darkly on the winding path by which they went. Gilbert lingered outside the gate after Marian and her uncle had gone into the cottage—he was so eager to hear his friend praise the girl he loved.

‘Well, John?’ he asked.

‘Well, dear old boy, she is all that is beautiful and charming, and I can only congratulate you upon your choice. Miss Nowell’s perfection is a subject about which there cannot be two opinions.’

‘And you think she loves me, Jack?’

‘ Do I think she loves you ? Why, surely, Gil, that is not a question upon which you want another man’s judgment ?’

‘ No, of course not, but one is never tired of receiving the assurance of that fact. And you could see by her way of speaking about me—’

‘ She spoke of you in the prettiest manner possible. She seems to consider you quite a superior being.’

‘ Dear girl, she is so good and simple-hearted. Do you know, Jack, I feel as if I could never be sufficiently grateful to Providence for my happiness in having won such an angel.’

‘ Well, you certainly have reason to consider yourself a very lucky fellow ; but I doubt if any man ever deserved good fortune better than you do, Gilbert. And now, good-bye. It’s getting unconscionably late, and I shall scarcely get back in time to change my clothes for dinner. We spend all our evenings in pious devotion to billiards, with a rubber or two, or a little lansquenet towards the small hours. Don’t forget your engagement to-morrow ; good-bye.’

They had a very pleasant evening at Heatherly. Sir David’s guests at this time consisted of a

Major Foljambe, an elderly man who had seen a good deal of service in India ; a Mr. Harker, who had been in the church, and had left it in disgust as alike unsuited to his tastes and capacity ; Mr. Windus Carr, a prosperous West-end solicitor, who had inherited a first-rate practice from his father, and who devoted his talents to the enjoyment of life, leaving his clients to the care of his partner, a steady-going stout gentleman, with a bald head, and an inexhaustible capacity for business ; and last, but by no means least, John Saltram, who possessed more influence over David Forster than any one else in the world.

CHAPTER VI.

SENTENCE OF EXILE.

AFTER the dinner at Heatherly, John Saltram came very often to the cottage. He did not care much for the fellows who were staying with Sir David this year, he told Gilbert. He knew all Major Foljambe's tiger-stories by heart, and had convicted him of glaring discrepancies in his description of the havoc he and his brother officers had made among the big game. Windus Carr was a conceited presuming cad, who was always boring them with impossible accounts of his conquests among the fair sex ; and that poor Harker was an unmitigated fool, whose brains had run into his billiard-cue. This was the report which John Saltram gave of his fellow-guests ; and he left the shooting-party morning after morning to go out boating with Gilbert and Marian, or to idle away the sunny hours on the lawn listening to the talk of the two others, and dropping in a

word now and then in a sleepy way as he lay stretched on the grass near them, looking up to the sky, with his arms crossed above his head.

He called at Lidford House one day when Gilbert had told him he should stay at home to write letters, and was duly presented to the Listers, who made a little dinner-party in his honour a few days afterwards, to which Captain Sedgewick and Marian were invited—a party which went off with more brightness and gaiety than was wont to distinguish the Lidford-House entertainments. After this there was more boating—long afternoons spent on the winding river, with occasional landings upon picturesque little islands or wooded banks, where there were the wild-flowers Marian Nowell loved and understood so well; more idle mornings in the cottage garden—a happy innocent break in the common course of life, which seemed almost as pleasant to John Saltram as to his friend. He had contrived to make himself popular with every one at Lidford, and was an especial favourite with Captain Sedgewick.

He seemed so thoroughly happy amongst them, and displayed such a perfect sympathy with them in all things, that Gilbert Fenton was taken

utterly by surprise by his abrupt departure, which happened one day without a word of warning. He had dined at the cottage on the previous evening, and had been in his wildest, most reckless spirits —that mood to which he was subject at rare intervals, and in which he exercised a potent fascination over his companions. He had beguiled the little party at the cottage into complete forgetfulness of the hour by his unwonted eloquence upon subjects of a deeper, higher kind than it was his habit to speak about; and then at the last moment, when the clock on the mantelpiece had struck twelve, he had suddenly seated himself at the piano, and sung them Moore's 'Farewell, but whenever you welcome the hour,' in tones that went straight to the hearts of the listeners. He had one of those rare sympathetic voices which move people to tears unawares, and before the song was ended Marian was fairly overcome, and had made a hasty escape from the room ashamed of her emotion.

Late as it was, Gilbert accompanied his friend for a mile of his homeward route. He had secured a latchkey during his last visit to Lidford House, and could let himself in quietly of a night

without entrenching upon the regular habits of Mrs. Lister's household.

Once clear of the cottage, John Saltram's gaiety vanished all in a moment, and gave place to a moody silence which Gilbert was powerless to dissipate.

'Is there anything amiss, Jack?' he asked. 'I know high spirits are not always a sign of inward contentment with you. Is there anything wrong to-night?'

'No.'

'Are you sure of that?'

'Quite sure. I may be a little knocked up, perhaps; that's all.'

No hint of his intended departure fell from him when they shook hands and wished each other good-night; but early next morning a brief note was delivered to Mr. Fenton at his sister's house to the following effect:

'MY DEAR GILBERT,—I find myself obliged to leave this place for London at once, and have not time to thank any one for the kindness I have received during my stay. Will you do the best to repair this omission on my part, and offer my

warmest expressions of gratitude to Captain Sedgewick and Miss Nowell for their goodness to me? Pray apologise for me also to Mr. and Mrs. Lister for my inability to make my adieux in a more formal manner than this, a shortcoming which I hope to atone for on some future visit. Tell Lister I shall be very pleased to see him if he will look me up at the Pnyx when he is next in town.

‘Ever yours,

‘JOHN SALTRAM.’

This was all. There was no explanation of the reason for this hurried journey,—a strange omission between men who were on terms of such perfect confidence as obtained with these two. Gilbert Fenton was not a little disturbed by this unlooked-for event, fearing that some kind of evil had befallen his friend.

‘His money-matters may have fallen into a desperate condition,’ he thought; ‘or perhaps that woman—that Mrs. Branston, is at the bottom of the business.’

He went to the cottage that morning as usual, but not with his accustomed feeling of unalloyed happiness. The serene heaven of his tranquil life

was clouded a little by this strange conduct of John Saltram's. It wounded him to think that his old companion was keeping a secret from him.

'I suppose it is because I lectured him a little about Mrs. Branston the other day,' he said to himself. 'The business is connected with her in some way, I daresay, and poor Jack does not care to arouse my virtuous indignation. That comes of taking a high moral tone with one's friend. He swallows the pill with a decent grace at the time, and shuts one out of his confidence ever afterwards.'

Captain Sedgewick expressed himself much surprised and disappointed by Mr. Saltram's departure. Marian said very little upon the subject. There seemed nothing extraordinary to her in the fact that a gentleman should be summoned to London by the claims of business.

Gilbert might have brooded longer upon the mystery involved in his friend's conduct, but that evening's post brought him trouble in the shape of bad news from Melbourne. His confidential clerk—an old man who had been with his father for many years, and who knew every intricacy of the business—wrote him a very long letter, dwell-

ing upon the evil fortune which had attended all their Australian transactions of late, and hinting at dishonesty and double-dealing on the part of Gilbert's cousin, Astley Fenton, the local manager.

The letter was a very sensible one, calculated to arouse a careless man from a false sense of security. Gilbert was so much disturbed by it, that he determined upon going back to London by the earliest fast-train next morning. It was cutting short his holiday only by a few days. He had meant to return at the beginning of the following week, and he felt that he had already some reason to reproach himself for his neglect of business.

He left Lidford happy in the thought that Captain Sedgewick and Marian were to come to London in October. The period of separation would be something less than a month. And after that? Well, he would of course spend Christmas at Lidford; and he fancied how the holly and mistletoe, the church-decorations and carol-singing, and all the stereotyped genialities of the season,—things that had seemed trite and dreary to him since the days of his boyhood,—would have a new significance and beauty for him when he

and Marian kept the sacred festival together. And then how quickly would begin the new year, the year whose spring-tide would see them man and wife ! Perhaps there is no period of this mortal life so truly happy as that in which all our thoughts are occupied in looking forward to some great joy to come. Whether the joy, when it does come, is ever so unqualified a delight as it seemed in the distance, or whether it ever comes at all, are questions which we have all solved for ourselves somehow or other. To Gilbert Fenton these day-dreams were bright and new, and he was troubled by no fear of their not being realised.

He went at his business with considerable ardour, and made a careful and detailed investigation of all affairs connected with their Melbourne trading, assisted throughout by Samuel Dwyer, the old clerk. The result of this examination convinced him that his cousin had been playing him false ; that the men with whom his pretended losses had been made were men of straw, and the transactions were shadows invented to cover his own embezzlements. It was a complicated business altogether ; and it was not until Gilbert Fenton had been engaged upon it for more than a

week, and had made searching inquiries as to the status of the firms with which the supposed dealings had taken place, that he was able to arrive at this conclusion. Having at last made himself master of the real state of things, as far as it was in any way possible to do so at that distance from the scene of action, Gilbert saw that there was only one line of conduct open to him as a man of business. That was to go at once to Melbourne, investigate his cousin's transactions on the spot, and take the management of the colonial house into his own hands. To do this would be a sore trial to him, for it would involve the postponement of his marriage. He could scarcely hope to do what he had to do in Melbourne and to get back to England before a later date than that which he had hoped would be his wedding-day. Yet to do anything less than this would be futile and foolish ; and it was possible that the future stability of his position was dependent upon his arrangement of these Melbourne difficulties. It was his home, the prosperity of his coming life, that he had to fight for ; and he told himself that he must put aside all weakness, as he had done once before, when he turned away from the easy-going

studies and pleasures of a young Oxford life to undertake a hand-to-hand fight with evil fortune.

He had conquered then, as he hoped to conquer now, having an energetic nature, and a strong faith in man's power to master fortune by honest work and patience.

There was no time lost after once his decision was arrived at. He began to put his affairs in order for departure immediately, and wrote to Marian within a few hours of making up his mind as to the necessity of this voyage. He told her frankly all that had happened, that their fortune was at stake, and that it was his bounden duty to take this step, hard as it might seem to him. He could not leave England without seeing her once more, he said, recently as they had parted, and brief as his leisure must needs be. There were so many things he would have to say to her on the eve of this cruel separation.

He went down to Lidford one evening when all the arrangements for his voyage were complete, and he had two clear days at his disposal before the vessel he was to go in left Liverpool. The Listers were very much surprised and shocked when he told them what he was going to do ; Mrs.

Lister bitterly bewailing the insecurity of all commercial positions, and appearing to consider her brother on the verge of bankruptcy.

He found a warm welcome at the cottage from the Captain, who heartily approved of the course he was taking, and was full of hopefulness about the future.

‘A few months more or less can make little difference,’ he said, when Gilbert was lamenting the postponement of his wedding. ‘Marian will be quite safe in her old uncle’s care; and I do not suppose either of you will love each other any the less for the delay. I have such perfect confidence in you, Gilbert, you see; and it is such a happiness to me to know that my darling’s future is in the hands of a man I can so thoroughly trust. Were you reduced to absolute poverty, with the battle of life to fight all over again, I would give you my dear girl without fear of the issue. I know you are of the stuff that is not to be beaten; and I believe that neither time nor circumstance could ever change your love for her.’

‘You may believe that. Every day makes her dearer to me. I should be ashamed to tell you how bitterly I feel this parting, and what a des-

perate mental struggle I went through before I could make up my mind to go.'

Marian came into the room in the midst of this conversation. She was very pale, and her eyes had a dull heavy look. The bad news in Gilbert's letter had distressed her even more than he had anticipated.

'My darling,' he said tenderly, looking down at the changed face, with her cold hand clasped in his own, 'how ill you are looking! I fear I made my letter too dismal, and that it frightened you.'

'O no, no. I am very sorry you should have this bad fortune, Gilbert, that is all.'

'There is nothing which I do not hope to repair, dear. The losses are not more than I can stand. All that I take to heart is the separation from you, Marian.'

'I am not worth so much regret,' she said, with her eyes fixed upon the ground, and her hands clasping and unclasping each other nervously.

'Not worth so much regret, Marian!' he exclaimed. 'You are all the world to me; the beginning and end of my universe.'

She looked a little brighter by and by, when

her lover had done his best to cheer her with hopeful talk, which cost him no small effort in the depressed state of his mind. The day went by very slowly, although it was the last which those two were to spend together until Gilbert Fenton's return. It was a hopelessly wet day, with a perpetual drizzling rain and a leaden-gray sky ; weather which seemed to harmonise well enough with the pervading gloom of Gilbert's thoughts as he stood by the fire leaning against an angle of the mantelpiece, and watching Marian's needle moving monotonously in and out of the canvas.

The Captain, who led an easy comfortable kind of life at all times, was apt to dispose of a good deal of his leisure in slumber upon such a day as this. He sat in his own particular easy-chair, dozing behind the shelter of a newspaper, and lulled agreeably by the low sound of Gilbert and Marian's conversation.

So the quiet hours went by, overshadowed by the gloom of that approaching separation. After dinner, when they had returned to the drawing-room, and Captain Sedgewick had refreshed his intellectual powers with copious draughts of strong tea, he began to talk of Marian's childhood, and

the circumstances which had thrown her into his hand.

'I don't suppose my little girl ever showed you her mother's jewel-case, did she, Gilbert?' he asked.

'Never.'

'I thought as much. It contains that old-fashioned jewelry I spoke of, family relics, which I have sometimes fancied might be of use to her, if ever her birthright were worth claiming. But I doubt if that will ever happen now that so many years have gone by, and there has been no endeavour to trace her.—Run and fetch the case, Marian. There are some of its contents which Gilbert ought to see before he leaves England—papers which I intended to show him when I first told him your mother's story.'

Marian left them, and came back in a few minutes carrying an old-fashioned ebony jewel-case inlaid with brass. She unlocked it with a little key hanging to her watch-chain, and exhibited its contents to Gilbert Fenton. There were some curious old rings, of no great value; a seal-ring with a crest cut on a bloodstone—a crest of that common kind of device which does not imply noble or ancient lineage on the part of

the bearer thereof; a necklace and earrings of amethyst; a gold bracelet with a miniature of a young man, whose handsome face had a hard disagreeable expression; a locket containing gray hair, and having a date and the initials ‘M. G.’ engraved on the massive plain gold case.

These were all the trinkets. In a secret drawer there was a certificate of marriage between Percival Nowell, bachelor, gentleman, and Lucy Geoffry, spinster, at St. Pancras church, London. The most interesting contents of the jewel case consisted of a small packet of letters written by Percival Nowell to Lucy Geoffry before their marriage.

‘I have read them carefully ever so many times, with the notion that they might throw some light upon Mr. and Mrs. Nowell’s antecedents,’ said the Captain, as Gilbert held these in his hands, disinclined to look at documents of so private and sacred a character; ‘but they tell very little. I fancy that Miss Geoffry was a governess in some family in London—the envelopes are missing, you see, so there is no evidence as to where she was living, except that it *was* in London—and that she left her employment to marry this Percival Nowell. You’d like to read

the letters yourself, I daresay, Gilbert. Put them in your pocket, and look them over at your leisure when you get home. You can bring them back before you leave Lidford.'

Mr. Fenton glanced at Marian to see if she had any objection to his reading the letters. She was quite silent, looking absently at the trinkets lying in the tray before her.

'You don't mind my reading your father's letters, Marian?' he asked.

'Not at all. Only I think you will find them very uninteresting.'

'I am interested in everything that concerns you.'

He put the papers in his pocket, and sat up for an hour in his room that night reading Percival Nowell's love-letters. They revealed very little to him, except the unmitigated selfishness of the writer. That quality exhibited itself in every page. The lovers had met for the first time at the house of some Mr. Crosby, in whose family Miss Geoffry seemed to be living; and there were clandestine meetings spoken of in the Regent's-park, for which reason Gilbert supposed Mr. Crosby's house must have been in that lo-

cality. There were broken appointments, for which Miss Geoffry was bitterly reproached by her lover, who abused the whole Crosby household in a venomous manner for having kept her at home at these times.

'If you loved me, as you pretend, Lucy,' Mr. Nowell wrote on one occasion, 'you would speedily exchange this degrading slavery for liberty and happiness with me, and would be content to leave the future *utterly* in my hands, without question or fear. A really generous woman would do this.'

There was a good deal more to the same effect, and it seemed as if the proposal of marriage came at last rather reluctantly; but it did come, and was repeated, and urged in a very pressing manner; while Lucy Geoffry to the last appeared to have hung back, as if dreading the result of that union.

The letters told little of the writer's circumstances or social status. Whenever he alluded to his father, it was with anger and contempt, and in a manner that implied some quarrel between them; but there was nothing to indicate what kind of man the father was.

Gilbert Fenton took the packet back to the

cottage next morning. He was to return to London that afternoon, and had only a few hours to spend with Marian. The day was dull and cold, but there was no rain; and they walked together in the garden, where the leaves were beginning to fall, and whence every appearance of summer seemed to have vanished since Gilbert's last visit.

For some time they were both rather silent, pacing thoughtfully up and down the sheltered walk that bounded the lawn. Gilbert found it impossible to put on an appearance of hopefulness on this last day. It was better wholly to give up the attempt, and resign himself to the gloom that brooded over him, shutting out the future. That airy castle of his—the villa on the banks of the Thames—seemed to have faded and vanished altogether. He could not look beyond the Australian journey to the happy time of his return. The hazards of time and distance bewildered him. He felt an unspeakable dread of the distance that was to divide him from Marian Nowell—a dread that grew stronger with every hour. He was destined to suffer a fresh pang before the moment of parting came. Marian turned to him by and by with an earnest anxious face, and said :

‘ Gilbert, there is something which I think I ought to say to you before you go away.’

‘ What is that, my darling ?’

‘ It is rather hard to say. I fear it will give you pain. I have been thinking about it for a long time. The thought has been a constant reproach to me. Gilbert, it would be better if we were both free ; better if you could leave England without any tie to weigh you down with anxieties when you are out yonder, and will have so much occasion for perfect freedom of mind.’

‘ Marian !’

‘ O, pray, pray don’t think me ungrateful or unmindful of your goodness to me. I am only anxious for your happiness. I am not steady enough, or fixed enough, in my mind. I am not worthy of all the thought and care you have given me.’

‘ Marian, have I done anything to forfeit your love ?’

‘ O no, no.’

‘ Then why do you say these things to me ? Do you want to break my heart ?’

‘ Would it break your heart if I were to recall my promise, Gilbert ?’

'Yes, Marian,' he answered gravely, drawing her suddenly to him, and looking into her face with earnest scrutinising eyes; 'but if you do not love me, if you cannot love me—and God knows how happy I have been in the belief that I had won your love long ago—let the word be spoken. I will bear it, my dear, I will bear it.'

'O no, no,' she cried, shocked by the dead whiteness of his face, and bursting into tears. 'I will try to be worthy of you. I will try to love you as you deserve to be loved. It was only a fancy of mine that it would be better for you to be free from all thoughts of me. I think it would seem very hard to me to lose your love. I don't think I could bear that, Gilbert.'

She looked up at him with an appealing expression through her tears—an innocent, half-childish look that went to his heart—and he clasped her to his breast, believing that this proposal to set him free had been indeed nothing more than a girlish caprice.

'My dearest, my life is bound up with your love,' he said. 'Nothing can part us except your ceasing to love me.'

CHAPTER VII.

‘ GOOD-BYE.’

THE hour for the final parting came at last, and Gilbert Fenton turned his back upon the little gate by which he had watched Marian Nowell standing upon that first summer Sunday evening which sealed his destiny.

He left Lidford weary at heart, weighed down by a depression he had vainly struggled against, and he brooded over his troubles all the way back to town. It seemed as if all the hopes that had made life so sweet to him only a week ago had been swept away. He could not look beyond that dreary Australian exile; he could not bring his thoughts to bear upon the time that was to come afterwards, and which need be no less bright because of this delay.

‘ She may die while I am away,’ he thought. ‘ O God, if that were to happen! If I were to come back and find her dead! Such things have

been ; and men and women have borne them, and gone on living.'

He had one more duty to perform before he left England. He had to say good-bye to John Saltram, whom he had not seen since they parted that night at Lidford. He could not leave England without some kind of farewell to his old friend, and he had reserved this last evening for the duty.

He went to the Pnyx on the chance of finding Saltram there, and failing in that, ate his solitary dinner in the coffee-room. The waiters told him that Mr. Saltram had not been at the club for some weeks. Gilbert did not waste much time over his dinner, and went straight from the Pnyx to the Temple, where John Saltram had a second-floor in Figtree-court.

Mr. Saltram was at home. It was his own sonorous voice which answered Gilbert's knock, bidding him enter with a muttered curse upon the interruption by way of addendum. The room into which Mr. Fenton went upon receiving this unpromising invitation was in a state of chaotic confusion. An open portmanteau sprawled upon the floor, and a whole wardrobe of masculine

garments seemed to have been shot at random on to the chairs near it; a dozen soda-water bottles, full and empty, were huddled in one corner; a tea-tray tottered on the extreme edge of a table heaped with dusty books and papers; and at a desk in the centre of the room, with a great paraffin lamp flaring upon his face as he wrote, sat John Saltram, surrounded by fallen slips of copy, writing as if to win a wager.

‘Who is it? and what do you want?’ he asked in a husky voice, without looking up from his paper or suspending the rapid progress of his pen.

‘Why, Jack, I don’t think I ever caught you so hard at work before.’

John Saltram dropped his pen at the sound of his friend’s voice and got up. He gave Gilbert his hand in a mechanical kind of way.

‘No, I don’t generally go at it quite so hard; but you know I have a knack of doing things against time. I have been giving myself a spell of hard work in order to pick up a little cash for the children of Israel.’

He dropped back into his chair, and Gilbert took one opposite him. The lamp shone full upon John Saltram’s face as he sat at his desk; and

after looking at him for a moment by that vivid light, Gilbert Fenton gave a cry of surprise.

‘What is the matter, Gil?’

‘You are the matter. You are looking as worn and haggard as if you'd had a long illness since I saw you last. I never remember you looking so ill. This kind of thing won't do, John. You'd soon kill yourself at this rate.’

‘Not to be done, my dear fellow. I am the toughest thing in creation. I have been sitting up all night for the last week or so, and that does rather impair the freshness of one's complexion; but I assure you there's nothing so good for a man as a week or two of unbroken work. I have been doing an exhaustive review of Roman literature for one of the quarterlies, and the subject involved a little more reading than I was quite prepared for.’

‘And you have really not been ill?’

‘Not in the least. I am never ill.’

He pushed aside his papers, and sat with his elbow on the desk and his head leaning on his hand, waiting for Gilbert to talk. He was evidently in one of those silent moods which were common to him at times.

Gilbert told him of his Melbourne troubles, and of his immediate departure. The announcement roused him from his absent humour. He dropped his arm from the table suddenly, and sat looking full at Gilbert with a very intent expression.

‘This is strange news,’ he said, ‘and it will cause the postponement of your marriage, I suppose?’

‘Unhappily, yes; that is unavoidable. Hard lines, isn’t it, Jack?’

‘Well, yes; I daresay the separation seems rather a hardship; but you are young enough to stand a few months’ delay. When do you sail?’

‘To-morrow.’

‘So soon?’

‘Yes. It is a case in which everything depends upon rapidity of action. I leave Liverpool to-morrow afternoon. I came up from Lidford to-day on purpose to spend a few farewell hours with you. And I have been thinking, Jack, that you might run down to Liverpool with me to-morrow, and see the last of me, eh, old fellow?’

John Saltram hesitated, looking doubtfully at his papers.

'It would be only a kind thing to do, Jack, and a wholesome change for yourself into the bargain. Anything would be better for you than being shut up in these chambers another day.'

'Well, Gilbert, I'll go with you,' said Mr. Saltram presently, with a kind of recklessness. 'It is a small thing to do for friendship. Yes, I'll see you off, dear boy. Egad, I wish I could go to Australia with you. I would, if it were not for my engagements with the children and sundry other creditors. I think a new country might do me good. But there's no use in talking about that. I'm bound hand and foot to the old one.'

'That reminds me of something I had to say to you, John. There must have been some reason for your leaving Lidford in that sudden way the other day, and your note explained nothing. I thought you and I had no secrets from each other. It's scarcely fair to treat me like that.'

'The business was hardly worth explaining,' answered the other moodily. 'A bill that I had forgotten for the time fell due just then, and I hurried off to set things straight.'

'Let me help you somehow or other, Jack.'

'No, Gilbert; I will never suffer you to be-

come entangled in the labyrinth of my affairs. You don't know what a hopeless wilderness you would enter if you were desperate enough to attempt my rescue. I have been past redemption for the last ten years, ever since I left Oxford. Nothing but a rich marriage will ever set me straight; and I sometimes doubt if that game is worth the candle, and whether it would not be better to make a clean sweep of my engagements, offer up my name to the execration of mankind and the fiery indignation of solvent journalists,—who would find subject for sensation leaders in my iniquities,—emigrate, and turn bushranger. A wild free life in the wilderness must be a happy exchange for all the petty worries and perplexities of this cursed existence.'

‘And how about Mrs. Branston, John? By the way, I thought that she might have had something to do with your sudden journey to London.’

‘No; she had nothing to do with it. I have not seen her since I came back from Lidford.’

‘Indeed!’

‘No. Your lecture had a potent effect, you see,’ said Mr. Saltram, with something of a

sneer. ‘ You have almost cured me of that passion.’

‘ My opinion would have very little influence if you were far gone, John. The fact is, Mrs. Branston, pretty and agreeable as she may be, is not the sort of woman to acquire any strong hold upon you.’

‘ You think not?’

‘ I am sure of it.’

After this John Saltram became more expansive. They sat together until late in the night, talking chiefly of the past, old friends, and half-forgotten days; recalling the scenes through which they had travelled together with a pensive tenderness, and dwelling regretfully upon that careless bygone time when life was fresh for both of them, and the future seemed to lie across the straightest, easiest high-road to reputation and happiness.

Gilbert spoke of that perilous illness of his in Egypt, the fever in which he had been given over by every one, and only saved at last by the exemplary care and devotion of his friend. John Saltram had a profound objection to this thing being talked about, and tried immediately to

change the drift of the conversation ; but to-night Gilbert was not to be stopped.

‘ You refuse the help of my purse, Jack,’ he said, ‘ and forget that I owe you my life. I should never have been to the fore to navigate the good ship Fenton and Co., if it hadn’t been for your care. The doctor fellow at Cairo told me as much in very plain terms. Yes, John, I consider myself your debtor to the amount of a life.’

‘ Saving a man’s life is sometimes rather a doubtful boon. I think if I had a fever, and some officious fool dragged me through it when I was in a fair way to make a decent end, I should be very savagely disposed towards him.’

‘ Why, John Saltram, you are the last man in the world from whom I should expect that dreary kind of talk. Yet I suppose it’s only a natural consequence of shutting yourself up in these rooms for ten days at a stretch.’

‘ What good use have I made of my life in the past, Gilbert ?’ demanded the other bitterly ; ‘ and what have I to look forward to in the future ? To marry, and redeem my position by the aid of a woman’s money. That’s hardly the noblest destiny that can befall a man. And yet I think if

Adela Branston were free, and willing to marry me, I might make something of my life. I might go into Parliament, and make something of a name for myself. I could write books instead of anonymous articles. I should scarcely sink down into an idle mindless existence of dinner-giving and dinner-eating. Yes, I think the best thing that could happen to me would be to marry Adela Branston.'

They parted at last, John Saltram having faithfully promised his friend to work no more that night, and they met at Euston-square early the next morning for the journey to Liverpool. Gilbert had never found his friend's company more delightful than on this last day. It seemed as if John Saltram put away every thought of self in his perfect sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the traveller. They dined together, and it was dusk when they wished each other good-bye on the deck of the vessel.

'Good-bye, Gilbert, and God bless you! If—if anything should happen to me—if I should have gone to the bad utterly before you come back, you must try to remember our friendship of the past. Think that I have loved you very

dearly—as well as one man ever loved another, perhaps.'

' My dear John, you have no need to tell me to think that. Nothing can ever weaken the love between us. And you are not likely to go to the bad. Good-bye, dear old friend. I shall remember you every day of my life. You are second only to Marian in my heart. I shall write you an account of my proceedings, and shall expect to hear from you. Once more, good-bye.'

CHAPTER VIII.

MISSING.

THE bell rang. Gilbert Fenton and his friend shook hands in silence for the last time, and in the next moment John Saltram ran down the steps to the little steamer which had brought them out to the larger vessel. The sails spread wide in the cool evening wind, and the mighty ship glided away into the dusk. John Saltram's last look showed him his friend's face gazing down upon him over the bulwarks full of trust and affection.

He went back to London by the evening express, and reached his chambers at a late hour that night. There had been some attempt at tidying the rooms in his absence; but his books and papers had been undisturbed. Some letters were lying on the desk, amongst them one in a big scrawling hand that was very familiar to Mr. Saltram, the envelope stamped 'Lidford.' He

tore this open eagerly. It was from Sir David Forster.

'DEAR SALTRAM' (wrote the Baronet),—'What do you mean by this iniquitous conduct? You only obtained my consent to your hurried departure the other day on condition you should come back in a week, yet there are no signs of you. Foljambe and the lawyer are gone, and I am alone with Harker, whose stupidity is something marvellous. I am dying by inches of this dismal state of things. I can't tell the man to go, you see, for he is really a most worthy creature, although such a consummate fool. For pity's sake come to me. You can do your literary work down here as well as in London, and I promise to respect your laborious hours.—Ever yours,

'DAVID FORSTER.'

John Saltram stood with this letter open in his hand, staring blankly at it, like a man lost in a dream.

'Go back!' he muttered at last—'go back, when I thought I did such a great thing in coming away! No, I am not weak enough for that folly.'

On the 5th of July in the following year, Gilbert Fenton landed in England, after nearly ten months of exile. He had found hard work to do in the colonial city, and had done it; surmounting every difficulty by a steady resolute course of action.

Astley Fenton had tried to shelter his frauds, heaping falsehood upon falsehood; and had ended by making a full confession, after receiving his cousin's promise not to prosecute. The sums made away with by him amounted to some thousands. Gilbert found that he had been leading a life of reckless extravagance, and was a notorious gambler. So there came an evening when, after a prolonged investigation of affairs, Astley Fenton put on his hat, and left his cousin's office for ever. When Gilbert heard of him next, he was clerk to a bookseller in Sidney.

The disentanglement of the Melbourne trading had occupied longer than Gilbert expected; and his exile had been especially dreary to him during the last two months he spent in Australia, from the failure of his English letters. The two first mails after his arrival had brought him letters from Marian and her uncle, and one short

note from John Saltram. The mails that followed brought him nothing, and he was inexpressibly alarmed and distressed by this fact. If he could by any possibility have returned to England immediately after the arrival of the first mail which brought him no letter, he would have done so. But his journey would have been wasted had he not remained to complete the work of reorganisation he had commenced; so he stayed, sorely against the grain, hoping to get a letter by the next mail.

That came, and with the same dispiriting result to Gilbert Fenton. There was a letter from his sister, it is true; but that was written from Switzerland, where she was travelling with her husband, and brought him no tidings of Marian. He tried to convince himself that if there had been bad news, it must needs have come to him; that the delay was only the result of accident, some mistake of Marian's as to the date of the mail. What more natural than that she should make such a mistake, at a place with such deficient postal arrangements as those which obtained at Lidford? But, argue with himself as he might, this silence of his betrothed was none

the less perplexing to him, and he was a prey to perpetual anxiety during the time that elapsed before the sailing of the vessel that was to convey him back to England.

Then came the long monotonous voyage, affording ample leisure for gloomy thoughts, for shapeless fears in the dead watches of the night, when the sea washed drearily against his cabin window, and he lay broad awake counting the hours that must wear themselves out before he could set foot on English ground. As the time of his arrival drew nearer, his mind grew restless and fitful, now full of hope and happy visions of his meeting with Marian, now weighed down by the burden of some unspeakable terror.

The day dawned at last, that sultry summer day, and Gilbert was amongst those eager passengers who quitted the vessel at daybreak.

He went straight from the quay to the railway-station, and the delay of an hour which he had to endure here seemed almost interminable to him. As he paced to and fro the long platform waiting for the London express, he wondered how he had borne all the previous delay, how he had been able to live through that dismal agonising time.

His own patience was a mystery to him now that the ordeal was over.

The express started at last, and he sat quietly in his corner trying to read a newspaper ; while his fellow-travellers discussed the state of trade in Liverpool, which seemed from their account to be as desperate and hopeless as the condition of all commerce appears invariably to be whenever commercial matters come under discussion. Gilbert Fenton was not interested in the Liverpool trade at this particular crisis. He knew that he had weathered the storm which had assailed his own fortunes, and that the future lay clear and bright before him.

He did not waste an hour in London, but went straight from one station to another, and was in time to catch a train for Fairleigh, the station nearest to Lidford. It was five o'clock in the afternoon when he arrived at this place, and chartered a fly to take him over to Lidford—a lovely summer afternoon. The sight of the familiar English scenery, looking so exquisite in its summer glory, filled him with a pleasure that was almost akin to pain. He had often walked this road with Marian ; and as he drove along he

looked eagerly at every distant figure, half hoping to see his darling approach him in the summer sunlight.

Mr. Fenton deposited his carpet-bag at the cosy village inn, where snow-white curtains fluttered gaily at every window in the warm western breeze, and innumerable geraniums made a gaudy blaze of scarlet against the wooden wall. He did not stop here to make any inquiries about those he had come to see. His heart was beating tumultuously in expectation of the meeting that seemed so near. He alighted from the fly, dismissed the driver, and walked rapidly across a field leading by a short-cut to the green on which Captain Sedgewick's house stood. This field brought him to the side of the green opposite the Captain's cottage. He stopped for a moment as he came through the little wooden gate, and looked across the grass, where a regiment of geese was marching towards the still pool of willow-shadowed water.

The shutters of the upper rooms were closed, and there was a board above the garden-gate. The cottage was to be let.

Gilbert Fenton's heart gave one great throb,

and then seemed to cease beating altogether. He walked across the green slowly, stunned by this unlooked-for blow. Yes, the house was empty. The garden, which he remembered in such exquisite order, had a weedy dilapidated look that seemed like the decay of some considerable time. He rang the bell several times, but there was no answer; and he was turning away from the gate with the stunned confused feeling still upon him, unable to consider what he ought to do next, when he heard himself called by his name, and saw a woman looking at him across the hedge of the neighbouring garden.

‘Were you wishing to make any inquiries about the last occupants of Hazel Cottage, sir?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Gilbert answered huskily, looking at her in an absent unseeing way.

He had seen her often during his visits to the cottage, busy at work in her garden, which was much smaller than the Captain’s, but he had never spoken to her before to-day.

She was a maiden lady, who eked-out her slender income by letting a part of her miniature abode whenever an opportunity for so doing oc-

curred. The care of this cottage occupied all her days, and formed the delight and glory of her life. It was a little larger than a good - sized doll's house, and furnished with spindle-legged chairs and tables that had been polished to the last extremity of brightness.

'Perhaps you would be so good as to walk into my sitting-room for a few moments, sir,' said this lady, opening her garden-gate. 'I shall be most happy to afford you any information about your friends.'

'You are very good,' said Gilbert, following her into the prim little parlour.

He had recovered his self-possession in some degree by this time, telling himself that this desrtion of Hazel Cottage involved no more than a change of residence.

'My name is Dodd,' said the lady, motioning Mr. Fenton to a chair, 'Miss Letitia Dodd. I had the pleasure of seeing you very often during your visits next door. I was not on visiting terms with Captain Sedgewick and Miss Nowell, although we bowed to each other out of doors. I am only a tradesman's daughter — indeed my brother is now carrying on business as a butcher

in Fairleigh—and of course I am quite aware of the difference in our positions. I am the last person to intrude myself upon my superiors.'

'If you will be so kind as to tell me where they have gone?' Gilbert asked, eager to stop this formal statement of Miss Dodd's social standing.

'Where *they* have gone!' she repeated. 'Dear, dear! Then you do not know—'

'I do not know what?'

'Of Captain Sedgewick's death.'

'Good God! My dear old friend! When did he die?'

'At the beginning of the year. It was very sudden—a fit of apoplexy. He was seized in the night, poor dear gentleman, and it was only discovered when the servant went to call him in the morning. He only lived two days after the seizure; and never spoke again.'

'And Miss Nowell—what made her leave the cottage? She is still at Lidford, I suppose?'

'O dear no, Mr. Fenton. She went away altogether about a month after the Captain's death.'

'Where did she go?'

'I cannot tell you that. I did not even know

that she intended leaving Hazel Cottage until the day after she left. When I saw the shutters closed and the board up, you might have knocked me down with a feather. Miss Nowell was so much liked in Lidford, and she had more than one invitation from friends to stay with them for the sake of a change after her uncle's death ; but she would not visit anywhere. She stayed quite alone in the cottage, with only the old servant.'

'But there must surely be some one in the place who knows where she has gone !' exclaimed Gilbert.

'I think not. The landlord of Hazel Cottage does not know. He is my landlord also, and I was asking him about Miss Nowell when I paid my rent the other day. He said he supposed she had gone away to be married. That has been the general impression, in fact, at Lidford. People made sure that Miss Nowell had left to be married to you.'

'I have only just returned from Australia. I have come back to fulfil my engagement to Miss Nowell. Can you suggest no one from whom I am likely to obtain information ?'

'There is the family at the Rectory ; they knew

her very well, and were extremely kind to her after her uncle's death. It might be worth your while to call upon Mr. Marchant.'

'Yes, I will call,' Gilbert answered; 'thanks for the suggestion.'

He wished Miss Dodd good-afternoon, and left her standing at the gate of her little garden, watching him with profound interest as he walked away towards the village. There was a pleasing mystery in the affair, to the mind of Miss Dodd.

Gilbert Fenton went at once to the Rectory, although it was now past seven o'clock. He had met Mr. and Mrs. Marchant several times, and had visited them with the Listers.

The Rector was at home, sitting over his solitary glass of port by the open window of his snug dining-room, looking lazily out at a group of sons and daughters playing croquet on the lawn. He was surprised to see Mr. Fenton, but welcomed him with much cordiality.

'I have come to you full of care, Mr. Marchant,' Gilbert began; 'and the pressing nature of my business must excuse the lateness of my visit.'

'There is no occasion for any excuse. I am

very glad to see you at this time. Pray help yourself to some wine, there are clean glasses near you; and take some of those strawberries, on which my wife prides herself amazingly. People who live in the country all their days are obliged to give their minds to horticulture. And now, what is this care of yours, Mr. Fenton? Nothing very serious, I hope.'

'It is very serious to me at present. I think you know that I am engaged to Miss Nowell.'

'Perfectly. I had imagined until this moment that you and she were married. When she left Lidford, I concluded that she had gone to stay with friends of yours, and that the marriage would, in all probability, take place at an early period, without any strict observance of etiquette as to her mourning for her uncle. It was natural that we should think this, knowing her solitary position.'

'Then you do not know where she went on leaving this place?'

'Not in the faintest degree. Her departure was altogether unexpected by us. My wife and daughters called upon her two or three times after the Captain's death, and were even anxious that

she should come here to stay for a short time ; but she would not do that. She seemed grateful, and touched by their anxiety about her, but they could not bring her to talk of her future.'

' And she told them nothing of her intention to leave Lidford ?'

' Not a word.'

This was all that Gilbert Fenton could learn. His interview with the Rector lasted some time longer; but it told him nothing. Whom next could he question ? He knew all Marian's friends, and he spent the next day in calling upon them, but with the same result ; no one could tell him her reason for leaving Hazel Cottage, or where she had gone.

There remained only one person whom he could question, and that was the old servant who had lived with Captain Sedgewick nearly all the time of his residence at Lidford, and whom Gilbert had conciliated by numerous gifts during his visits to Hazel Cottage. She was a good-humoured honest creature, of about fifty, and had been devoted to the Captain and Marian.

After a good deal of trouble, Gilbert ascertained that this woman had not accompanied her

young mistress when she left Lidford, but had taken service in a grocer's family at Fairleigh. Having discovered this, Mr. Fenton set off immediately for the little market-town, on foot this time, and with his mind full of the days when he and Marian had walked this way together.

He found the shop to which he had been directed — a roomy old-fashioned emporium in the High-street, sunk three or four feet below the level of the pavement, and approached by a couple of steps; a shop with a low ceiling, that was made lower by bunches of candles, hams, bacon, and other merchandise hanging from the massive beams that spanned it. Mr. Fenton, having duly stated his business, was shown into the grocer's best parlour—a resplendent apartment, where there were more ornaments in the way of shell - and - feather flowers under glass shades, and Bohemian-glass scent-bottles, than were consistent with luxurious occupation, and where every chair and sofa was made a perfect veiled prophet by enshrouding antimacassors. Here Sarah Down, the late Captain's servant, came to Mr. Fenton, wiping her hands and arms upon a spotless canvas apron, and generally

apologetic as to her appearance. To this woman Gilbert repeated the question he had asked of others, with the same disheartening result.

'The poor dear young lady felt the Captain's loss dreadfully; as well she might, when they had been so fond of each other,' Sarah Down said, in answer to one of Gilbert's inquiries. 'I never knew any one grieve so deeply. She wouldn't go anywhere, and she couldn't bear to see any one who came to see her. She used to shut herself up in the Captain's room day after day, kneeling by his bedside, and crying as if her heart would break. I have looked through the keyhole sometimes, and seen her there on her knees, with her face buried in the bedclothes. She didn't care to talk about him even to me, and I had hard work to persuade her to eat or drink enough to keep life in her at this time. When the days were fine, I used to try and get her to walk out a little, for she looked as white as a ghost for want of air; and after a good deal of persuasion, she did go out sometimes of an afternoon, but she wouldn't ask any one to walk with her, though there were plenty she might have asked—the young ladies from the Rectory and others. She

preferred being alone, she told me, and I was glad that she should get the air and the change anyhow. She brightened a little after this, but very little. It was all of a sudden one day that she told me she was going away. I wanted to go with her, but she said that couldn't be. I asked her where she was going, and she told me, after hesitating a little, that she was going to friends in London. I knew she had been very fond of two young ladies that she went to school with at Lidford, whose father lived in London; and I thought it was to their house she was going. I asked her if it was, and she said yes. She made arrangements with the landlord about selling the furniture. He is an auctioneer himself, and there was no difficulty about that. The money was to be sent to her at a post-office in London. I wondered at that, but she said it was better so. She paid every sixpence that was owing, and gave me a handsome present over and above my wages; though I didn't want to take anything from her, poor dear young lady, knowing that there was very little left after the Captain's death, except the furniture, which wasn't likely to bring much. And so she went away about two days after she

first mentioned that she was going to leave Lidford. It was all very sudden, and I don't think she bade good-bye to any one in the place. She seemed quite broken-down with grief in those two last days. I shall never forget her poor pale face when she got into the fly.'

'How did she go? From the station here?'

'I don't know anything about that, except that the fly came to the cottage for her and her luggage. I wanted to go to the station with her, to see her off, but she wouldn't let me.'

'Did she mention me during the time that followed Captain Sedgewick's death?'

'Only when I spoke about you, sir. I used to try to comfort her, telling her she had you still left to care for her, and to make up for him she'd lost. But she used to look at me in a strange pitiful sort of way, and shake her head. "I am very miserable, Sarah," she would say to me; "I am quite alone in the world now my dear uncle is gone, and I don't know what to do." I told her she ought to look forward to the time when she would be married, and would have a happy home of her own; but I could never get her to talk of that.'

‘Can you tell me the name and address of her friends in London—the young ladies with whom she went to school?’

‘The name is Bruce, sir; and they live, or they used to live at that time, in St. John’s-wood. I have heard Miss Nowell say that, but I don’t know the name of the street or number of the house.’

‘I daresay I shall be able to find them. It is a strange business, Sarah. It is most unaccountable that my dearest girl should have left Lidford without writing me word of her removal and her intentions with regard to the future—that she should have sent me no announcement of her uncle’s death, although she must have known how well I loved him. I am going to ask you a question that is very painful to me, but which must be asked sooner or later. Do you know of any one else whom she may have liked better than me—any one whose influence may have governed her at the time she left Lidford?’

‘No, indeed, sir,’ replied the woman promptly. ‘Who else was there? Miss Nowell knew so few gentlemen, and saw no one except the Rector’s family and two or three ladies after the uncle’s death.’

'Not at the cottage, perhaps. But she may have seen some one out-of-doors. You say she always went out alone at that time, and preferred to do so.'

'Yes, sir, that is true. But it seemed natural enough that she should like to be alone on account of her grief.'

'There must have been some reason for her silence towards me, Sarah. She could not have acted so cruelly without some powerful motive. Heaven only knows what it may have been. The business of my life will be to find her—to see her face to face once more, and hear the explanation of her conduct from her own lips.'

He thanked the woman for her information, slipped a sovereign into her hand, and departed. He called upon the proprietor of Hazel Cottage, an auctioneer, surveyor, and house-agent in the High-street of Fairleigh, but could obtain no fresh tidings from this gentleman, except the fact that the money realised by the Captain's furniture had been sent to Miss Nowell at a post-office in the City, and had been duly acknowledged by her, after a delay of about a week. The auctioneer showed Gilbert the letter of receipt, which was

worded in a very formal business-like manner, and bore no address but ‘London.’ The sight of the familiar hand gave him a sharp pang. O God, how he had languished for a letter in that handwriting!

He had nothing more to do after this in the neighbourhood of Lidford, except to pay a pious visit to the Captain’s grave, where a handsome slab of granite recorded the virtues of the dead. It lay in the prettiest, most retired part of the churchyard, half-hidden under a wide-spreading yew. Gilbert Fenton sat upon a low wall near at hand for a long time, brooding over his broken life, and wishing himself at rest beneath that solemn shelter.

‘She never loved me,’ he said to himself bitterly. ‘I shut my eyes obstinately to the truth, or I might have discovered the secret of her indifference by a hundred signs and tokens. I fancied that a man who loved a woman as I loved her must succeed in winning her heart at last. And I accepted her girlish trust in me, her innocent gratitude for my attentions, as the evidence of her love. Even at the last, when she wanted to release me, I would not understand. I did not

expect to be loved as I loved her. I would have given so much, and been content to take so little. What is there I would not have done—what sacrifice of my own pride that I would not have happily made to win her? O my darling, even in your desertion of me you might have trusted me better than this! You would have found me fond and faithful through every trial, your friend in spite of every wrong.'

He knelt down by the grave, and pressed his lips to the granite on which George Sedgewick's name was chiselled.

'I owe it to the dead to discover her fate,' he said to himself, as he rose from that reverent attitude. 'I owe it to the dead to penetrate the secret of her new life, to assure myself that she is happy, and has fallen under no fatal influence.'

The Listers were still abroad, and Gilbert was very glad that it was so. It would have excruciated him to hear his sister's comments on Marian's conduct, and to perceive the suppressed exultation with which she would most likely have discussed this unhappy termination to an engagement which had been entered on in utter disregard of her counsel.

CHAPTER IX.

JOHN SALTRAM'S ADVICE.

MR. FENTON discovered the Bruce family in Boundary-road St. John's-wood, after a good deal of trouble. But they could tell him nothing of their dear friend Miss Nowell, of whom they spoke with the warmest regard. They had never seen her since they had left the school at Lidford, where they had been boarders, and she a daily pupil. They had not even heard of Captain Sedgewick's death.

Gilbert asked these young ladies if they knew of any other acquaintance of Marian's living in or near London. They both answered promptly in the negative. The school was a small one, and they had been the only pupils who came from town ; nor had they ever heard Marian speak of any London friends.

Thus ended Mr. Fenton's inquiries in this direction, leaving him no wiser than when he left

Lidford. He had now exhausted every possible channel by which he might obtain information. The ground lay open before him, and there was nothing left for him but publicity. He took an advertisement to the *Times* office that afternoon, and paid for six insertions in the second column :

'MISS MARIAN NOWELL, late of Lidford, Midlandshire, is requested to communicate immediately with G. F., Post-office, Wigmore-street ; to whom her silence has caused extreme anxiety. She may rely upon the advertiser's friendship and fidelity under all possible circumstances.'

Gilbert felt a little more hopeful after having done this. He fancied this advertisement must needs bring him some tidings of his lost love. The mystery might be happily solved after all, and Marian prove true to him. He tried to persuade himself that this was possible ; but it was very difficult to reconcile her line of conduct with the fact of her regard for him.

In the evening he went to the Temple, eager to see John Saltram, from whom he had no intention to keep the secret of his trouble. He found his friend at home, writing, with his desk

pushed against the open window, and the dust and shabbiness of his room dismally obvious in the hot July sunshine. He started up as Gilbert entered, and the dark face grew suddenly pale.

'You took me by surprise,' he said. 'I didn't know you were in England.'

'I only landed two days ago,' answered Gilbert, as they shook hands. 'I daresay I startled you a little, dear old fellow, coming in upon you without a moment's notice, when you fancied I was at the Antipodes. But, you see, I hunted you up directly I was free.'

'You have done well out yonder, I hope, Gilbert?'

'Yes; everything has gone well enough with me in business. But my coming home has been a dreary one.'

'How is that?'

'Captain Sedgewick is dead, and Marian Nowell is lost.'

'Lost! What do you mean by that?'

Mr. Fenton told his friend all that had befallen him since his arrival in England.

'I come to you for counsel and help, John,' he said, when he had finished his story.

'I will give you my help, so far as it is possible for one man to help another in such a business, and my counsel in all honesty,' answered John Saltram; 'but I doubt if you will be inclined to receive it.'

'Why should you doubt that?'

'Because it is not likely to agree with your own ideas.'

'Speak out, John.'

'I think that if Miss Nowell had really loved you, she would never have taken this step. I think that she must have left Lidford in order to escape from her engagement, perhaps expecting your early return. I believe your pursuit of her can only end in failure and disappointment; and although I am ready to assist you in any manner you wish, I warn you against sacrificing your life to a delusion.'

'It is not under the delusion that Marian Nowell loves me that I am going to search for her,' Gilbert Fenton said slowly, after an interval of silence. 'I am not so weak as to believe *that* after what has happened, though I have tried to argue with myself, only this afternoon, that she may still be true to me, and that there may have

been some hidden reason for her conduct. Granted that she wished to escape from her engagement, she might have trusted to my honour to give her a prompt release the moment I became acquainted with the real state of her feelings. There must have been some stronger influence than this at work when she left Lidford. I want to know the true cause of that hurried departure, John. I want to be sure that Marian Nowell is happy, and in safe hands.'

'By what means do you hope to discover this?'

'I rely a good deal upon repeated advertisements in the *Times*. They may bring me tidings of Marian—if not directly, from some person who has seen her since she left Lidford.'

'If she really wished to hide herself from you, she would most likely change her name.'

'Why should she wish to hide herself from me? She must know that she might trust me. Of her own free will she would never do this cruel thing. There must have been some secret influence at work upon my darling's mind. It shall be my business to discover what that influence was; or in plainer words still, to discover the

man who has robbed me of Marian Nowell's heart.'

'It comes to that, then,' said John Saltram.
'You suspect some unknown rival?'

'Yes; that is the most natural conclusion to arrive at. And yet heaven knows how unwillingly I take that into consideration.'

'There is no particular person whom you suspect?'

'No one.'

'If there should be no result from your advertisement, what will you do?'

'I cannot tell you just yet. Unless I get some kind of clue, the business will seem a hopeless one. But I cannot imagine that the advertisements will fail completely. If she left Lidford to be married, there must be some record of her marriage. Should my first advertisements fail, my next shall be inserted with a view to discover such a record.'

'And if, after infinite trouble, you should find her the wife of another man, what reward would you have for your wasted time and lost labour?'

'The happiness of knowing her to be in a safe

and honourable position. I love her too dearly to remain in ignorance of her fate.'

'Well, Gilbert, I know that good advice is generally thrown away in such a case as this; but I have a fixed opinion on the subject. To my mind, there is only one wise course open to you, and that is, to let this thing alone, and resign yourself to the inevitable. I acknowledge that Miss Nowell was eminently worthy of your affection; but you know the old song—"If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be?" There are plenty of women in the world. The choice is wide enough.'

'Not for me, John. Marian Nowell is the only woman I have ever loved, the only woman I ever can love.'

'My dear boy, it is so natural for you to believe that just now; and a year hence you will think so differently!'

'No, John. But I am not going to make any protestations of my constancy. Let the matter rest. I know that my life is broken—that this blow has left me nothing to hope for or to live for, except the hope of finding the girl who has wronged me. I won't weary you with lamenta-

tions. My talk has been entirely of self since I came into this room. Tell me your own affairs, Jack, old friend. How has the world gone with you since we parted at Liverpool last year ?'

' Not too smoothly. My financial position becomes a little more obscure and difficult of comprehension every year, as you know ; but I rub on somehow. I have been working at literature like a galley-slave ; have contributed no end of stuff to the Quarterlies ; and am engaged upon a book,—yes, Gil, positively a book,—which I hope may do great things for me if ever I can finish it.'

' Is it a novel ?'

' A novel ! no !' cried John Saltram, with a wry face ; ' it is the romance of reality I deal with. My book is a Life of Jonathan Swift. He was always a favourite study of mine, you know, that brilliant, unprincipled, intolerant, cynical, irresistible, miserable man. Scott's biography seems to me to give but a tame picture, and others are only sketches. Mine will be a pre-Raphaelite study—faithful as a photograph, careful as a miniature on ivory, and life-size.'

' I trust it will bring you fame and money

when the time comes,' answered Gilbert. ' And how about Mrs. Branston? Is she as charming as ever ?'

' A little more so, if possible. Poor old Michael Branston is dead—went off the hooks rather suddenly about a month ago. The widow looks amazingly pretty in her weeds.'

' And you will marry her, I suppose, Jack, as soon as her mourning is over?'

' Well, yes; it is on the cards,' John Saltram said, in an indifferent tone.

' Why, how you say that! Is there any doubt as to the lady's fortune?'

' O no; that is all square enough. Michael Branston's will was in the *Illustrated London News*; the personality sworn under a hundred and twenty thousand,—all left to the widow,—besides real property—a house in Cavendish-square, the villa at Maidenhead, and a place near Leamington.'

' It would be a splendid match for you, Jack.'

' Splendid, of course. An unprecedented stroke of luck for such a fellow as I. Yet I doubt very much if I am quite the man for that sort of life. I should be apt to fancy it a kind of gilded

slavery, I think, Gil, and there would be some danger of my kicking off the chains.'

'But you like Mrs. Branston, don't you, Jack?'

'Like her? Yes, I like her too well to deceive her. And she would expect devoted affection from a second husband. She is full of romantic ideas, schoolgirl theories of life which she was obliged to nip in the bud when she went to the altar with old Branston, but which have burst into flower now that she is free.'

'Have you seen her often since her husband's death?'

'Only twice;—once immediately after the funeral, and again yesterday. She is living in Cavendish-square just now.'

'I hope you will marry her. I should like to see you safe in smooth water, and with some purpose in life. I should like to see you turn your back upon the loneliness of these dreary chambers.'

'They are not very brilliant, are they? I don't know how many generations of briefless barristers these chairs and tables have served. The rooms have an atmosphere of failure; but

they suit me very well. I am not always here, you know. I spend a good deal of my time in the country.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another; wherever my truant fancy leads me. I prefer such spots as are most remote from the haunts of men, unknown to cockneys; and so long as there is a river within reach of my lodging, I can make myself tolerably happy with a punt and a fishing-rod, and contrive to forget my cares.'

'You have not been to Lidford since I left England, I suppose?'

'Yes; I was at Heatherly a week or two in the winter. Poor old David Forster would not let me alone until I went down to him. He was ill, and in a very dismal condition altogether, abandoned by the rest of his cronies, and a close prisoner in the house which has so many painful associations for him. It was a work of charity to bear him company.'

'Did you see Captain Sedgewick, or Marian, while you were down there?'

'No. I should have liked to have called upon

the kind old Captain; but Forster was unconscionably exacting,—there was no getting away from him.'

Gilbert stopped with his friend until late that night, smoking and drinking a mild mixture of brandy and soda-water, and talking of the things that had been doing on this side of the globe while he had been on the other. No more was said about Marian, or Gilbert's plans for the future. In his own mind that one subject reigned supreme, shutting-out every other thought; but he did not want to make himself a nuisance to John Saltram, and he knew that there are bounds to the endurance of which friendship is capable.

The two friends seemed cheerful enough as they smoked their cigars in the summer dusk, the quiet of the flagged court below rarely broken by a passing footfall. It was the pleasantest evening which Gilbert Fenton had spent for a long time, in spite of the heavy burden on his mind, in spite of the depressing view which Mr. Saltram took of his position.

'Dear old John,' he said, as they shook hands at parting, 'I cannot tell you what a happiness it has been to me to see you again. We were never

separated so long before since the day when I ate my first dinner at Balliol.'

The other seemed touched by this expression of regard, but disinclined to betray his emotion, after the manner of Englishmen on such occasions.

'My dear Gilbert, it ought to be very pleasant to me to hear that. But I doubt if I am worthy of so much. As far as my own liking for you goes, there is no inequality between us; but you are a better fellow than I am by a long way, and are not likely to profit much in the long-run by your friendship for a reprobate like me.'

'That's all nonsense, John. That kind of vague self-accusation means nothing. I have no doubt I shall live to see you a great man, and to be proud enough of being able to claim you as the chosen friend of my youth. Mr. Branston's death has cleared the way for you. The chances of a distinguished future are within your grasp.'

'The chances within my grasp! Yes. My dear Gilbert, I tell you there are some men for whom everything in this world comes too late.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Only that I doubt if you will ever see me
Adela Branston's husband.'

'I can't understand you, John.'

'My dear fellow, there is nothing strange in
that. There are times when I cannot understand
myself.'

CHAPTER X.

JACOB NOWELL.

THE days went by, and brought Gilbert Fenton no reply to his advertisement. He called at the post-office morning and evening, only to find the same result ; and a dull blank feeling, a kind of deadness of heart and mind, began to steal over him with the progress of the days. He went through the routine of his business-life steadily enough, working as hard as he had ever worked ; but it was only by a supreme effort that he could bring his mind to bear upon the details of business—all interest in his office-work was gone.

The advertisement had appeared for the sixth time, and Gilbert had framed a second, offering a reward of twenty pounds for any direct evidence of the marriage of Marian Nowell ; when a letter was handed to him one evening at the post-office —a letter in a common blue envelope, directed in

a curious crabbed hand, and bearing the London post-mark.

His heart beat loud and fast as he tore open this envelope. It contained only a half-sheet of paper, with these words written upon it in the cramped half-illegible hand which figured on the outside :

‘ The person advertising for Marian Nowell is requested to call at No. 5 Queen-Anne’s-court Wardour-street, any evening after seven.’

This was all. Little as this brief note implied, however, Gilbert made sure that the writer must be in a position to give him some kind of information about the object of his search. It was six o’clock when he received the communication. He went from the post-office to his lodgings with his mind in a tumult of excitement, made a mere pretence of taking a hasty dinner, and set off immediately afterwards for Wardour-street.

There was more than time for him to walk, and he hoped that the walk might have some effect in reducing the fever of his mind. He did not want to present himself before strangers—who, no doubt, only wanted to make a barter of any knowledge they possessed as to Marian’s

whereabouts—in a state of mental excitement. The address to which he was going mystified him beyond measure. What could people living in such a place as this know of her whom he sought?

He was in Wardour-street at a quarter before seven, but he had considerable trouble in finding Queen-Anne's-court, and the clocks of the neighbourhood were striking the hour as he turned into a narrow alley with dingy-looking shops on one side and a high dead wall on the other. The gas was glimmering faintly in the window of No. 5, and a good deal of old silver, tarnished and blackened, huddled together behind the wire-guarded glass, was dimly visible in the uncertain light. There was some old jewelry too, and a little wooden bowl of sovereigns or gold coins of some kind or other.

On a brass plate upon the door of this establishment there appeared the name of Jacob Nowell, silversmith and money-changer.

Gilbert Fenton stared in amazement at this inscription. It must needs be some relative of Marian's he was about to see.

He opened the door, bewildered a little by

this discovery, and a shrill bell gave notice of his entrance to those within. A tall lanky young man, with a sallow face and sleek black hair, emerged quickly from some door in the obscure background, and asked in a sharp voice what the visitor pleased to want.

‘I wish to see Mr. Nowell, the writer of a letter addressed to the post-office in Wigmore-street.’

The sallow-faced young man disappeared without a word, leaving Gilbert standing in the dimly lighted shop, where he saw more old silver crowded upon shelves behind glass doors, carved ebony cabinets looming out of the dusk, and here and there an old picture in a tarnished frame. On the counter there was a glass case containing foreign bank-notes, and gold, some curious old watches, and other trinkets, a baby’s coral, a battered silver cup, and a gold snuff-box.

While Gilbert waited thus he heard voices in a room at the back—the shrill tones of the sallow young man, and a feeble old voice raised querulously—and then, after a delay which seemed long to his impatience, the young man reappeared and told him Mr. Nowell was ready to see him.

Gilbert went into the room at the end of the shop—a small dark parlour, more crowded with a heterogeneous collection of plate, pictures, and bric-à-brac of all kinds than the shop itself. Sultry as the July evening was, there was a fire burning in the pinched rusty grate, and over this fire the owner of the room bent affectionately, with his slippered feet on the fender, and his bony hands clasping his bony knees.

He was an old man, with long yellowish-white hair streaming from beneath a velvet skull-cap, and bright black eyes deep set in a pale thin face. His nose was a sharp aquiline, and gave something of a bird-like aspect to a countenance that must once have been very handsome. He was wrapped in a long dressing-gown of some thick gray woollen stuff.

The sallow-faced young man lingered by the half-glass door between the parlour and the shop, as if he would fain have remained a witness to the interview about to take place between his master and the stranger; but the old man looked round at him sharply, and said,

‘That will do, Tulliver; you can go back to the shop. If Abrahams brings that little lot

again to-night, tell him I'll give five-and-nine an ounce, not a fraction more.'

Mr. Tulliver retired, leaving the door ajar ever so little; but the penetrating black eyes of the master were quick to perceive this manœuvre.

'Will you be so good as to shut that door, sir, quite securely?' he said to Gilbert. 'That young man is very inquisitive; I'm afraid I've kept him too long. A mistake, that. People talk of old servants; but half the robberies in the world are committed by old servants. Be seated, if you please, sir. You find this room rather close, perhaps. Some people do; but I'm old and chilly, and I can't live without a fire.'

'I have come to you in great anxiety of mind,' said Gilbert, as he seated himself upon the only disengaged chair in the room, 'and with some hope that you may be able to set my mind at ease by affording me information about Miss Marian Nowell.'

'I can give you no information about her.'

'Indeed!' cried Gilbert, with a bitter pang of disappointment; 'and yet you answered my advertisement.'

'I did, because I have some reason to sup-

pose this Marian Nowell may be my granddaughter.'

'That is quite possible.'

'Can you tell me her father's name?'

'Percival Nowell. Her mother was a Miss Lucy Geoffry.'

'Right,' said the old man. 'Percival Nowell was my only son—my only child of late years. There was a girl, but she died early. He was my only son, and his mother and I were foolish enough to be proud of his good looks and his clever ways; and we brought him up a gentleman, sent him to an expensive school, and after that to the University, and pinched ourselves in every way for his sake. My father was a gentleman; and it was only after I had failed as a professional man, through circumstances which I need not explain to you now, that I took to this business. I would have made any sacrifice in reason for that boy of mine. I wanted him to be a gentleman, and to make his way in one of the learned professions. After a great deal of chopping and changing, he fixed upon the Bar, took chambers in the Temple, made me pay all the fees, and pretended to study. But I soon found

that he was leading a wild dissipated life, and was never likely to be good for anything. He got into debt, drew bills upon me, and behaved altogether in a most shameful manner. When I sent for him, and remonstrated with him upon his disgraceful conduct, he told me that I was a miser, that I spent my life in a dog-kennel for the sake of hoarding money, and that I deserved nothing better than his treatment of me. I may have been better off at this time than I had cared to let him know, for I had soon found out what a reckless scoundrel I had to deal with; but if he had behaved decently, he would have found me generous and indulgent enough. As it was, I told him to go about his business, and never to expect another sixpence from me as long as he lived. How he managed to exist after this, I hardly know. He was very much mixed-up with a disreputable lot of turf-men, and I believe he made money by betting. His mother robbed me for him, I found out afterwards, and contrived to send him a good deal of money at odd times. My business as a dealer in second-hand silver was better then than it is now, and I had so much money passing through my hands that it was

pretty easy for my wife to cheat me. Poor soul ! she has been dead and gone these fifteen years, and I have freely forgiven her. She loved that young man to distraction. If he had wanted a step to reach the object of his wishes, she would have laid herself down in the dust and let him walk over her body. I suppose it is in the nature of mothers to love their sons like that. Well, sir, I never saw my gentleman after that day. I had plenty of letters from him, all asking for money ; threatening letters, pitiful letters, letters in which he swore he would destroy himself if he didn't receive a remittance by return of post ; but I never sent him a shilling. About a year after our last meeting, I received the announcement of his marriage with Miss Geoffry. He wrote to tell me that, if I would allow him a decent income, he would reform and lead a steady life. That letter I did answer ; to the effect that, if he chose to come here and act as my shopman, I would give him board and lodging for himself and his wife, and such wages as he should deserve. I told him that I had given him his chance as a gentleman, and he had thrown it away. I would give him the opportunity now of succeeding in a humbler

career by sheer industry and perseverance, as I had succeeded myself. If he thought that I had made a fortune, there was so much the more reason for him to try his luck. This was the last letter I ever wrote to him. It was unanswered; but about a year and a half afterwards there came a few lines to his mother, telling her of the birth of a daughter, which was to be called Marian, after her. This last letter came from Brussels.'

'And did you hear no more of your son after this?' Gilbert asked.

'Nothing. I think his mother used to get letters from him in secret for some time; that these failed suddenly at last; and that anxiety about her worthless son—anxiety which she tried to hide from me—shortened her life. She never complained, poor soul! never mentioned Percy's name until the last, when she begged me to be kind to him if he should ever come to throw himself upon my kindness. I gave her my promise that, if that came to pass, he should find me a better friend to him than he deserved. It is hard to refuse the last prayer of a faithful wife who has done her duty patiently for nearly thirty years.'

'Have you any reason to suppose your son still living?'

'I have no evidence of his death. Often and often, after my poor wife was gone, I have sat alone here of a night thinking of him; thinking that he might come in upon me at any moment; almost listening for his footstep in the quiet of the place. But he never came. He would have found me very soft-hearted at such times. My mind changed to him a good deal after his mother's death. I used to think of him as he was in his boyhood, when Marian and I had such great hopes of him, and would sit and talk of him for hours together by this fireside. An old man left quite alone as I was had plenty of time for such thoughts. Night after night I have fancied I heard his step, and have looked up at that door expecting to see him open it and come in; but he never came. He may be dead. I suppose he is dead; or he would have come to make another attempt at getting money out of me.'

'You have never taken any measures for finding him?' inquired Gilbert.

'No. If he wanted me, he knew where I was to be found. *I* was a fixture. It was his busi-

ness to come to me. When I saw the name of Marian Nowell in your advertisement a week ago, I felt curious to know whether it could be my grandchild you were looking for. I held-off till this morning, thinking it wasn't worth my while to make any inquiries about the matter; but I couldn't get it out of my head somehow; and it ended by my answering your advertisement. I am an old man, you see, without a creature belonging to me; and it might be a comfort to me to meet with some one of my own flesh and blood. The bit of money I may leave behind me when I die won't be much; but it might as well go to my son's child as to a stranger.'

'If your son's child can be found, you will discover her to be well worthy of your love. Yes, though she has done me a cruel wrong, I believe her to be all that is good and pure and true.'

'What is the wrong that she has done you?'

Gilbert told Jacob Nowell the story of his engagement, and the bitter disappointment which had befallen him on his return from Australia. The old man listened with every appearance of interest. He approved of Gilbert's notion of advertising for the particulars of a possible marriage,

and offered to bear his part in the expenses of the search for his granddaughter.

Gilbert smiled at this offer.

'You do not know what a worthless thing money is to me now,' he said, 'or how lightly I hold my own trouble or loss in this matter.'

He left Queen-Anne's-court soon after this, after having promised Jacob Nowell to return and report progress so soon as there should be anything worth telling. He went back to Wigmore-street heavy-hearted, depressed by the reaction that followed the vain hope which the silversmith's letter had inspired. It mattered little to him to know the antecedents of Marian's father, while Marian's destiny remained still hidden from him.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MARRIAGE AT WYGROVE.

ON the following day Gilbert Fenton took his second advertisement to the office in Printing-house-square ; an advertisement offering a reward of twenty pounds for any reliable information as to the marriage of Marian Nowell. A week went by, during which the advertisement appeared on alternate days ; and at the end of that time there came a letter from the parish-clerk of Wygrove, a small town about forty miles farther from London than Lidford, stating that, on the 14th of March, John Holbrook and Marian Nowell had been married at the church in that place. Gilbert Fenton left London by an early train upon the morning after his receipt of this letter ; and at about three o'clock in the afternoon found himself on the outskirts of Wygrove, rather a difficult place to reach, involving a good deal of delay at out-of-the-way

junctions, and a six-mile journey by stage-coach from the nearest station.

It was about the dullest dreariest little town to which his destiny had ever brought Gilbert Fenton, consisting of a melancholy high-street, with a blank market-place, and a townhall that looked as if it had not been opened within the memory of man ; a grand old gothic church, much too large for the requirements of the place ; a grim square brick box inscribed ‘Ebenezer ;’ and a few prim villas straggling off into the country.

On one side of the church there was a curious little old-fashioned court, wonderfully neat and clean, with houses the parlours whereof were sunk below the level of the pavement, after the manner of these old places. There was a great show of geraniums in the casements, and a general aspect of brightness and order distinguished all these modest dwellings. It was to this court that Mr. Fenton had been directed on inquiring for Thomas Stoneham, the parish-clerk, at the inn where the coach deposited him. He was fortunate enough to find Mr. Stoneham sunning himself on the threshold of his domicile, smoking an after-dinner pipe. A pleasant clattering of tea-things sounded

from the neat little parlour within, showing that, early as it was, there were already preparations for the cup which cheers without inebriating in the Stoneham household.

Thomas Stoneham, supported by a freshly-painted door of a vivid green and an extensive brass plate engraved with his name and functions, was a personage of some dignity. He was a middle-aged man, ponderous and slow of motion, with a latent pomposity, which he rendered as agreeable as possible by the urbanity of his manners. He was a man of a lofty spirit, who believed in his office as something exalted above all other dignities of this earth—less lucrative, of course, than a bishopric or the woolsack, and of a narrower range, but quite as important on a small scale. ‘The world might get on pretty well without bishops,’ thought Mr. Stoneham, when he pondered upon these things as he smoked his churchwarden pipe; ‘but what would become of a parish in which there was no clerk?’

This gentleman, seeing Gilbert Fenton approach, was quick to surmise that the stranger came in answer to the letter he had written the day before. The advent of a stranger in Wygrove

was so rare an occurrence, that it was natural enough for him to jump at this conclusion.

'I believe you are Mr. Stoneham,' said Gilbert, 'and the writer of a letter in answer to an advertisement in the *Times*.'

'My name is Stoneham, sir; I am the clerk of this parish, and have been for twenty years and more, as I think I may have stated in the letter to which you refer. Will you be so kind as to step inside?'

Mr. Stoneham waved his hand towards the parlour, to which apartment Gilbert descended. Here he found Mrs. Stoneham, a meek little sandy-haired woman, who seemed to be borne down by the weight of her lord's dignity; and Miss Stoneham, also meek and sandy, with a great many stiff little corkscrew ringlets budding-out all over her head and a sharp little inquiring nose.

These ladies would have retired on Gilbert's entrance, but he begged them to remain; and after a good deal of polite hesitation they consented to do so, Mrs. Stoneham resuming her seat before the tea-tray, and Miss Stoneham retiring to a little table by the window, where she was engaged in trimming a bonnet.

' I want to know all about this marriage, Mr. Stoneham,' Gilbert began, when he had seated himself in a shining mahogany arm-chair by the empty fireplace. ' First and foremost, I want you to tell me where Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook are now living ? '

The parish-clerk shook his head with a stately slowness.

' Not to be done, sir,' he said ; ' when Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook left here they went the Lord knows where. They went away the very day they were married. There was a fly waiting for them at the church-door, with their luggage upon it, when the ceremony was over, ready to drive them to Grangewick station. I saw them get into it and drive away ; and that's every mortal thing that I know as to what became of them after they were married in yonder church.'

' You don't know who this Mr. Holbrook is ? '

' No more than the babe unborn, sir. He was a stranger in this place, was only here long enough to get the license for his marriage. I should take him to be a gentleman ; but he wasn't a pleasant person to speak to—rather stand-off-ish in his manners. He wasn't the sort of man I should

have chosen if I'd been a pretty young woman like Miss Nowell ; but there's no accounting for taste, and she seemed uncommonly fond of him. I never saw any one more agitated than she was when they were married. She was crying in a quiet way all through the service, and when it was over she fainted dead-off. I daresay it did seem hard to her to be married like that, without so much as a friend to give her away. She was in mourning too, deep mourning.'

'Can you give me any description of this man —this Mr. Holbrook ?'

'Well, no, sir ; he was an ordinary kind of person to look at ; might be any age between thirty and forty ; not a gentleman that I should have taken a fancy to myself, as I said before ; but young women are that wayward and uncertain like, there's no knowing where to have them.'

'Was Miss Nowell long at Wygrove before her marriage ?'

'About three weeks. She lodged with Miss Long, up the town, a friend of my daughter's. If you'd like to ask any questions of Miss Long, our Jemima might step round there with you presently.'

'I should be very glad to do so,' Gilbert answered quickly.

He asked several more questions; but Mr. Stoneham could give him no information, except as to the bare fact of the marriage. Gilbert knew now that the girl he had so fondly loved and so entirely trusted was utterly lost to him; that he had been jilted cruelly and heartlessly, as he could but own to himself. Yes, she had jilted him, had in all probability never loved him. He blamed himself for having urged his suit too ardently, with little reference to Marian's own feelings, with a rooted obstinate conviction that he needed only to win her in order to insure the happiness of both.

Having fully proved Mr. Stoneham's inability to afford him any farther help in this business, Gilbert availed himself of the fair Jemima's willingness to 'step round' to Miss Long's domicile with him, in the hope of obtaining fuller information from that lady. While Miss Stoneham was engaged in putting on her bonnet for this expedition, the clerk proposed to take Gilbert across to the church and show him the entry of the marriage in the register. 'With a view to the satis-

factory settlement of the reward,' Mr. Stoneham added in a fat voice, and with the air of a man to whom twenty pounds more or less was an affair of very little moment.

Gilbert assented to this, and accompanied Mr. Stoneham to a little side-door which admitted them into the old church, where the light shone dimly through painted windows, in which there seemed more leaden framework than glass. The atmosphere of the place was cold even on this sultry July afternoon, and the vestry to which Mr. Stoneham conducted his companion had a damp mouldy smell.

He opened a cupboard, with a good deal of jingling of a great bunch of keys, and produced the register; a grim-looking volume bound in dingy leather, and calculated to inspire gloomy feelings in the minds of the bridegrooms and brides who had occasion to inscribe their names therein; a volume upon which the loves and the graces who hover around the entrance to the matrimonial state had shed no ray of glamour.

Thomas Stoneham laid this book before Gilbert, open at the page on which Marian's marriage was recorded. Yes, there was the familiar signa-

ture in the fair flowing hand he had loved so well. It was his Marian, and no other, whom John Holbrook had married in that gloomy old church.

The signature of the bridegroom was in a stiff straight hand, all the letters formed with unusual precision, as if the name had been written in a slow laboured way.

Who could this John Holbrook be? Gilbert was quite certain that he had never heard the name at Lidford, nor could he believe that if any attachment between this man and Marian Nowell had existed before his own acquaintance with her, Captain Sedgewick would have been so dishonourable as to keep the fact a secret from him. This John Holbrook must needs, therefore, be some one who had come to Lidford during Gilbert's absence from England; yet Sarah Down had been able to tell him of no new visitor at Hazel Cottage.

He copied the record of the marriage on a leaf in his pocket-book, paid Mr. Stoneham a couple of ten-pound notes, and left the church. The clerk's daughter was waiting for him in the little court outside, and they went at once to the house

where Miss Nowell had lodged during her residence at Wygrove.

It was a house in a neat little terrace on the outskirts of the town; a house approached by a flight of steep stone steps of spotless purity, and a half-glass door, which opened at once into a bright airy-looking parlour, faintly perfumed with rose-leaves and lavender mouldering in the china vases on the mantelpiece. Here Gilbert was introduced to Miss Long, a maiden lady of uncertain age, who wore stiff bands of suspiciously black hair under an imposing structure of lace and artificial flowers, and a rusty black-silk dress, the body of which fitted so tightly as to seem like a kind of armour. This lady received Mr. Fenton very graciously, and declared herself quite ready to give him any information in her power about Miss Nowell.

It happened unfortunately, however, that her power was of a most limited extent.

‘A sweeter young lady never lived than Miss Nowell,’ she said. ‘I’ve had a great many people occupying these apartments since my father’s death left me thrown upon my own resources. I’ve had lodgers that I might call permanent, in

a manner of speaking ; but I never had any one that I took-to as I took-to Miss Nowell, though she was hardly with me three weeks from first to last.'

'Did she seem happy in her mind during that time ?' Gilbert asked.

'Well, no ; I cannot say that she did. I should have expected to see a young lady that was going to be married to the man she loved much more cheerful and hopeful about the future than Miss Nowell was. She told me that her uncle had not been dead many weeks, and I thought at first that this was the only grief she had on her mind ; but after some time, when I found her very low and downhearted, and had won upon her to trust me almost as if I had been an old friend, she owned to me that she had behaved very badly to a gentleman she had been engaged to, and that the thought of her wickedness to him preyed upon her mind. "I don't think any good can ever come of my marriage, Miss Long," she said to me ; "I think I must surely be punished for my falsehood to the good man who loved me so truly. But there are some things in life that seem like fate. They come

upon us in a moment, and we have no strength to fight against them. I believe it was my fate to love John Holbrook. There is nothing in this world I could refuse to do for his sake. If he had asked me for my life, I must have given it to him as freely as I gave him my love. From the first hour in which I saw him he was my master.”

‘This Mr. Holbrook was very fond of her, I suppose?’

‘I daresay he was, sir; but he was not a man that showed his feelings very much. They used to go for long walks together, though it was March and cold windy weather, and she always seemed happier when he brought her home. He came every evening to drink tea with her, and I used to hear them talking as I sat at work in the next room. She was happy enough when he was with her. It was only when she was alone that she would give way to low spirits and gloomy thoughts about the future.’

‘Did she ever tell you anything about Mr. Holbrook—his position or profession? how long she had known him? how and where they had first met?’

‘No, sir. She told me once that he was not

rich ; I think that is about all she ever said of him, except when she spoke of his influence over her, and her trust in him.'

'Have you any idea where they were going to live after their marriage ?'

'I cannot tell you the name of the place. Miss Nowell said that a friend of Mr. Holbrook's was going to lend him an old farmhouse in a very pretty part of the country. It would be very lonely, she said, and her husband would have sometimes to leave her to attend to his business in London ; but she would not mind that. "Some day, I daresay, he will let me live in London with him," she said ; "but I don't like to ask him that yet."

'Did she drop no hint as to the whereabouts of this place to which they were going ?'

'It was somewhere in Hampshire ; that is all I can remember.'

'I would give a great deal to know more,' Gilbert said with a sigh. 'In what manner did this Mr. Holbrook impress you ? You were interested in the young lady, and would therefore naturally be interested in her lover. Did he strike you as worthy of her ?'

'I cannot say that he did, sir,' Miss Long answered doubtfully. 'I could see that he had great power over her, though his manner to her was always very gentle; but I cannot say that I took-to him myself. I daresay he is a very clever man; but he had a cold proud way that kept one at a distance from him, and I seemed to know no more of him at the last than I had known on the first day I saw him. I believe he loved Miss Nowell, and that's about all the good I do believe of him.'

After this there was no more to be asked of Miss Long; so Gilbert thanked her for her civility, and bade good-evening at once to her and to Miss Stoneham. There was time for him to catch the last coach to Grangewick station. He determined upon going from Grangewick to Lidford, instead of returning to London. He wanted, if possible, to find-out something more about this man Holbrook, who must surely have been known to some one at Lidford during his secret courtship of Marian Nowell.

He wasted two days at Lidford making inquiries on this subject, in as quiet a manner as possible and in every imaginable quarter; but

without the slightest result. No one either at Lidford or Fairleigh had ever heard of Mr. Holbrook.

Gilbert's last inquiries were made in a singular direction. After exhausting every likely channel of information, he had a few hours left before the departure of the fast-train by which he had determined to return to London ; and this leisure he devoted to a visit to Heatherly-park, in the chance of finding Sir David Forster at home. It was just possible that Mr. Holbrook might be one of Sir David's innumerable bachelor acquaintances.

Gilbert walked from Lidford to Heatherly by that romantic woodland path by which he had gone with Marian and her uncle on the bright September afternoon when he first saw Sir David's house. The solitary walk awakened very bitter thoughts ; the memory of those hopes which had then made the sunshine of his life, and without which existence seemed a weary purposeless journey across a desert land.

Sir David was at home, the woman at the lodge told him ; and he went on to the house, and rang a great clanging bell, which made an

alarming clamour in the utter stillness of the place.

A gray-haired old servant answered the summons, and ushered Gilbert into the state drawing-room, an apartment with a lofty arched roof, eight long windows, and a generally ecclesiastical aspect, which was more suggestive of solemn grandeur than of domestic comfort.

Here Gilbert waited for about ten minutes, at the end of which time the man returned, to request that he would be so kind as to go to Sir David's study. His master was something of an invalid, the man told Gilbert.

They went through the billiard-room to a very snug little apartment, with dark-panelled walls and one large window opening upon a rose-garden on the southern side of the house. There was a ponderous carved-oak bookcase on one side of the room ; on all the others the paraphernalia of sporting—gunnery and fishing-tackle, small-swords, whips, and boxing-gloves—artistically arranged against the panelling ; and over the mantelpiece an elaborate collection of meerschaum pipes. Through a half-open door Gilbert caught a glimpse of a comfortable bedchamber leading out of this room.

Sir David was sitting on a low easy-chair near the window, with one leg supported on a luxuriously-cushioned rest, invented for the relief of gouty subjects. Although not yet forty, the baronet was a chronic sufferer from this complaint.

‘My dear Mr. Fenton, how good of you to come to me!’ he exclaimed, shaking hands very cordially with Gilbert. ‘Here I am, laid by the heels in this dreary old place, and quite alone. You can’t imagine what a treat it is to see a friendly intelligent face from the outer world.’

‘The purpose of my visit is such a purely selfish one, that I am really ashamed to receive such a kindly greeting, Sir David. If I had known you were here and an invalid, I should have gladly come to see you; but I didn’t know it. I have been at Lidford on a matter of business for the last two days; and I came here on the hazard of finding you, and with a faint hope that you might be able to give me some help in an affair which is supremely important to me.’

Sir David Forster looked at Gilbert Fenton curiously for a moment, and then took up an empty meerschaum that lay upon a little table near him, and began to fill it with a thoughtful

air. Gilbert had dropped into an arm-chair on the opposite side of the open window, and was watching the baronet's face, puzzled a little by that curious transient expression which had just flitted across it.

'What is the business?' Sir David asked presently; 'and how can I be of use to you?'

'I think you knew all about my engagement to Miss Nowell when I was here last September, Sir David,' Gilbert began presently.

'Yes, Saltram told me you were engaged; not but what it was easy enough to see how the land lay, without any telling.'

'Miss Nowell has jilted me. I love her too dearly to be able to entertain any vindictive feeling against her; but I do feel vindictively disposed towards the man who has robbed me of her, for I know that only a very powerful influence would have induced her to break faith with me; and this man must needs have known the dishonourable thing he was doing when he tempted her away from me. I want to know who he is, Sir David, and how he came to acquire such an influence over my plighted wife.'

'My dear Fenton, you are going on so fast!

You say Miss Nowell has jilted you. She is married to some one else, then, I suppose ?'

' She is married to a Mr. Holbrook. I came to Lidford the night before last, with the hope of finding out something about him ; but all my endeavours have resulted in failure. It struck me at last, as a kind of forlorn hope, that this Mr. Holbrook might possibly be one of your autumnal visitors ; and I came here to ask you that question.'

' No,' answered the baronet ; ' I have had no visitor called Holbrook. Is the name quite strange to yourself ?'

' Entirely strange.'

' And this Mr. Holbrook is now Miss Nowell's husband ? and you want to know who he is ? With what end ?'

' I want to find the man who has done me the deadliest wrong one man can do another.'

' My dear fellow, don't you see that it is fate, and not Mr. Holbrook, that has done you this wrong ? If Miss Nowell had really loved you as she ought to have loved you, it would have been quite impossible for her to be tempted away from you. It was her destiny to marry this Holbrook, rely upon it ; and had you been on the spot to

protect your own interests, the result would have been just the same. Believe me, I am very sorry for you, and can fully sympathise with your feelings in this business; but I cannot see what good could possibly arise out of a meeting between you and your fortunate rival. The days of duelling are past; and even if it were not so, I think you are too generous to seek to deprive Miss Nowell of her husband.'

'I do not know about that. There are some wrongs which all a man's Christianity is not wide enough to cover. I think if that man and I were to meet, there would be very little question of mercy on my side. I hold a man who could act as he has acted unworthy of all consideration—utterly unworthy of the woman he has won from me.'

'My dear fellow, you know the old saying. A man who is in love thinks everything fair. There is no such thing as honour in such a case as this. Of course, I don't want to defend this Holbrook; I only want to awaken your senses to the absurdity of any vindictive pursuit of the man. If the lady did not love you, believe me, you are well out of the business.'

‘Yes, that is what every one would tell me, I daresay,’ Gilbert answered impatiently. ‘But is there to be no atonement for my broken life, rendered barren to me by this man’s act? I tell you, Sir David, there is no such thing as pardon for a wrong like this. But I know how foolish this talk must seem to you: there is always something ridiculous in the sufferings of a jilted lover.’

‘Not at all, my dear Fenton. I heartily wish that I could be of use to you in this matter; but there is very little chance of that; and, believe me, there is only one rational course open to you, which is, to forget Miss Nowell, or Mrs. Holbrook, with all possible assiduity.’

Gilbert smiled, a melancholy incredulous smile. Sir David’s advice was only the echo of John Saltram’s counsel—the counsel which he would receive from every man of the world, no doubt—the counsel which he himself would most likely have given to a friend under the same circumstances.

Sir David was very cordial, and wanted his visitor to dine and sleep at Heatherly; but this Gilbert declined. He was eager to get back to London now that his business was finished.

He arrived in town late that night; and went

back to his office-work next day with a dreary feeling that he must needs go through the same dull routine day after day in all the time to come, without purpose or hope in his life, only because a man must go on living somehow to the end of his earthly pilgrimage, whether the sun shine upon him or not.

He went to Queen-Anne's-court one evening soon after his return, and told Mr. Nowell all he had discovered at Wygrove. The old man showed himself keenly interested in his granddaughter's fate.

'I would give a great deal to see her before I die,' he said. 'Whatever I have to leave will be hers. It may be little or much—I won't speak about that; but I've lived a hard life, and saved where other men would have spent. I should like to see my son's child; I should like to have some one of my own flesh and blood about me in my last days.'

'Would it not be a good plan to put an advertisement into the *Times*, addressed to Mrs. Holbrook, from a relation? She would be likely to answer that, when she would not reply to any appeal coming directly from me.'

‘ Yes,’ answered Jacob Nowell ; ‘ and her husband would let her come to me for the sake of what I may have to leave her. But that can’t be helped, I suppose ; it is the fate of a man who lives as I have lived, to be cared for at last only for what he has to give. I’ll put in such an advertisement as you speak of ; and we’ll see what comes of it.’

CHAPTER XII.

A FRIENDLY COUNSELLOR.

GILBERT FENTON called several times in the Temple without being able to see John Saltram; a slip of paper pasted on the outer door of that gentleman's chamber informed the public that he was 'out of town,' and that was all. Gilbert took the trouble to penetrate the domicile of the laundress who officiated in Mr. Saltram's chambers, in order to obtain some more particular information as to her employer's movements, and after infinite difficulty succeeded in finding that industrious matron in the remote obscurity of a narrow court near the river. But the laundress could tell Mr. Fenton very little. She did not know whither Mr. Saltram had gone, or when he was likely to return. He was one of the most unceringest gentlemen she had to do for; and he had been out of town a great deal lately; which was not to be wondered at, considering the trying hot weather, when it

was not to be supposed that gentlefolks as was free to do what they pleased would stay in London. It was hard enough upon working people with five children to wash and mend and cook for, and fever in the court besides, and provisions dearer than they had been these ten years. Gilbert asked if Mr. Saltram had left any orders about his letters; but the woman told him, no; there never was such a careless gentleman about letters. He never cared about having them sent after him, and would let them lie in the box till the dust got thick upon them.

Gilbert left a brief note for John Saltram with the woman—a note begging his friend to come to him when he was next in London; and having done this, he paid no more visits to the Temple, but waited patiently for Mr. Saltram's coming, feeling very sure that his request would not be neglected. If anything could have intensified the gloom of his mind at this time it would have been the absence of that one friend, whom he loved better than he had ever loved any one in this world, except Marian Nowell. He stayed in town all through the blank August and September season, working harder than he had worked since the

early days of his commercial life, taking neither pleasure nor interest in anything, and keeping as much as possible out of the way of all his old acquaintance.

No answer came to Jacob Nowell's advertisement, although it appeared several times ; and the old man began to despair of ever seeing his granddaughter. Gilbert used to drop in upon him sometimes of an evening during this period, at his urgent request. He was interested in the solitary silversmith for Marian's sake, and very willingly sacrificed an occasional evening for his gratification. He fancied that these visits of his inspired some kind of jealousy in the breast of the sallow-faced, sleek-haired shopman ; who regarded him always on these occasions with a look of suppressed malevolence, and by every stratagem in his power tried to find out the nature of the conversation between the visitor and his employer, making all kinds of excuses to come into the parlour, and showing himself proof against the most humiliating treatment from his master.

' Does that young man expect you to leave him money ? and does he look upon me as a pos-

sible rival?' Gilbert asked one night, provoked by the shopman's conduct.

'Very likely,' Mr. Nowell answered with a malicious grin. 'One gets good service from a man who expects his reward in the future. Luke Tulliver serves me very well indeed, and of course I am not responsible for his delusions.'

'Do you know, Mr. Nowell, that is a man I should scarcely care to trust. To my mind there is a warning of danger in his countenance.'

'My dear sir, I have never trusted any one in my life,' answered the silversmith promptly. 'I don't for a moment suppose that Luke Tulliver would be honest if I gave him an opportunity to cheat me. As to the badness of his countenance, that is so much the better. I like to deal with an obvious rogue. The really dangerous subject is your honest fool, who goes on straight enough till he has lulled one into a false security, and then turns thief all at once at the instigation of some clever tempter.'

'That young man lives in the house with you, I suppose?'

'Yes; my household consists of Luke Tulliver, and an old woman who does the cooking and

other work. There are a couple of garrets at the top of the house where the two sleep; my own bedroom is over this; and the room over the shop is full of pictures and other unsaleable stuff, which I have seldom occasion to show to anybody. My business is not what it once was, Mr. Fenton. I have made some rather lucky hits in the way of picture-dealing in the course of my business career, but I haven't done a big line lately.'

Gilbert was inclined to believe that Jacob Nowell was a much richer man than he cared to confess, and that the fortune which Marian Nowell might inherit in the future was a considerable one. The old man had all the attributes of a miser. The house in which he lived had the aspect of a place in which money has been made and hoarded day by day through long dull years.

It was not until the end of October that John Saltram made his appearance at his old friend's lodgings. He had just come up from the country, and was looking his best—brighter and younger than Gilbert had seen him look for a long time.

'My dear Jack, I began to think I should

never see you again. What have you been doing all this time, and where have you been ?'

' I have been hard at work, as usual, for the reviews, down Oxford way, at a little place on the river. And how has the world been going with you, Gilbert ? I saw your advertisement offering a reward for evidence of Miss Nowell's marriage. Was there any result ?'

' Yes ; I know all about the marriage now, but I don't know who or what the man is,' Gilbert answered ; and then went on to give his friend a detailed account of his experience at Wygrove, and his visit to Sir David Forster.

' My dear foolish Gilbert,' said John Saltram, ' how much useless trouble you have given yourself ! Was it not enough to know that this girl had broken faith with you ? I think, were I in your place, that would be the end of the story for me. And now you know more than that—you know that she is another man's wife. If you find her, nothing can come of it.'

' It is the man I want to find, John ; the man whom I shall make it the business of my life to discover.'

' For what good ?'

'For the deadliest harm to him,' Gilbert answered moodily. 'If ever he and I meet, I will have some payment for my broken life; some compensation for my ruined hopes. We two should not meet and part lightly, rely upon it.'

'You can make no excuse for his love, that fatal irresistible passion, which outweighs truth and honour when they are set in the opposite scale. I did not think you could be so hard, Gilbert; I thought you would have more mercy on the man who wronged you.'

'I could pardon any injury but this. I will never forgive this.'

John Saltram shrugged his shoulders with a deprecating air.

'It 's a mistake, my dear fellow,' he said. 'Life is not long enough for these strong passions. There is nothing in the world worth the price these bitter hatreds and stormy angers cost us. You have thrown away a great deal of deep feeling on a lady, whose misfortune it was not to be able to return your affection as she might have done—as you most fully deserved at her hands. Why waste any farther emotion in regrets that are as useless as they are foolish?'

' You may as well ask me why I exist,' Gilbert answered quietly. ' Regret for all I have lost is a part of my life.'

After this there was no more to be said, and Mr. Saltram went on to speak of pleasanter topics. The two men dined together, and sat by the fire afterwards with a bottle of claret between them, smoking their cigars, and talking till late into the night.

It was not to be supposed that Adela Branston's name could be omitted entirely from this confidential talk.

' I have seen nothing and heard very little of her while I have been away,' John Saltram said, in answer to a question of Gilbert's; ' but I called in Cavendish-square this afternoon, and was fortunate enough to find her at home. She wants me to dine with her next Sunday, and I half promised to do so. Will you come too? I know that she would be glad to see you.'

' I cannot see that I am wanted, John.'

' But I tell you that you are wanted. I wish you to go with me. Mrs. Branston likes you amazingly, if you care to know the opinion of so frivolous a person.'

'I am very much flattered by Mrs. Branston's kindly estimate of me, but I do not think I have any claim to it, except the fact that I am your friend. I shall be happy to go with you on Sunday, if you really wish it.'

'I do really wish it. I shall drop Mrs. Branston a line to say you will come. She asked me to bring you whenever I had an opportunity. The dinner-hour is seven. I'll call for you here a few minutes before. I don't promise you a very lively evening, remember. There will only be Adela, and a lady she has taken as her companion.'

'I don't care about lively evenings. I have been nowhere in society since I returned from Melbourne. I have done with all that kind of thing.'

'My dear Gilbert, that sort of renunciation will never do,' John Saltram said earnestly. 'A man cannot turn his back upon society at your age. Life lies all before you, and it rests with yourself to create a happy future. Let the dead bury their dead.'

'Yes, John; and what is left for the living when that burial is over? I don't want to make myself obnoxious by whining over my troubles,

but they are not to be lessened by philosophy, and I can do nothing but bear them as best I may. I had long been growing tired of society, in the conventional acceptation of the word, and all the stereotyped pleasures of a commercial man's life. Those things are less than nothing when a man has nothing brighter and fairer beyond them—no inner life by which the common things of this world are made precious. It is only dropping out of the arena a little earlier than I might have done otherwise. I have a notion that I shall wind-up my affairs next year, sell my business, and go abroad. I could manage to retire upon a very decent income, in spite of my losses the other day.'

'Don't dream of that, Gilbert; for heaven's sake, don't dream of anything so mad as that. What would a man of your age be without some kind of career? A mere purposeless wanderer on the face of the earth. Stick to business, dear old fellow. Believe me, there is nothing like work to make a man forget any foolish trouble of this kind. And you will forget it, Gilbert, be assured of that. If I were not certain it would be so, I should—'

He stopped suddenly, staring absently at the fire with a darkening brow.

‘ You would do what, John ?’

‘ Hate this man Holbrook almost as savagely as you hate him, for having come between you and your happiness. Yet, if Marian Nowell did not love you—as a wife should love her husband, with all her heart and soul—it was ten thousand times better that the knot should be cut in time, however roughly. Think what your misery would have been if you had discovered after your marriage that her heart had never been really yours !’

‘ I cannot imagine that possible. I have no shadow of doubt that I should have succeeded in winning her heart if this man had not robbed me of her. My absence gave him his opportunity. Had I been at hand to protect my own interests, I do not think his influence could have prevailed against me.’

‘ It is quite natural that you should think that,’ John Saltram said gravely. ‘ Yet you may be mistaken. A woman’s love is such a capricious thing, and so often bestowed upon the least deserving amongst those who seek it.’

After this they were silent for some time, and

then Gilbert told his friend about his acquaintance with Jacob Nowell, and the old man's futile endeavours to find his grandchild ; to all of which Mr. Saltram listened attentively.

' Then you fancy there is a good bit of money in question ? ' he said, when Gilbert had told him everything.

' I fancy so. But I have no actual ground for the belief. The place in which the old man lives is poor enough, and he has carefully abstained from any hint as to what he might leave his granddaughter. Whatever it is, Marian ought to have it ; and there is very little chance of that, unless she comes forward in response to Mr. Nowell's advertisements.'

' It is a pity she should lose the chance of this inheritance, certainly,' said Mr. Saltram.

And then the conversation changed, and they talked of other subjects until it was time for them to part.

John Saltram walked back to the Temple in a very sombre mood, meditating upon his friend's trouble.

' Poor old Gilbert,' he said to himself, ' this business has touched him more deeply than I

could have thought possible. I wish things had happened otherwise. What is it Lady Macbeth says? “Naught’s had, all’s spent, when our desire is got without content.” I wonder whether the fulfilment of one’s heart’s desire ever does bring perfect contentment? I think not. There is always something wanting. And if a man comes by his wish basely, there is a taint of poison in the wine of life that neutralises all its sweetness.’

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. PALLINSON HAS VIEWS.

AT seven o'clock on Sunday evening, as the neighbouring church bells were just sounding their last peal, Mr. Fenton found himself on the threshold of Mrs. Branston's house in Cavendish-square. It was rather a gloomy mansion, pervaded throughout with evidences of its late owner's oriental career: old Indian cabinets; ponderous chairs of elaborately-carved ebony, clumsy in form and barbaric in design; curious old china and lacquered ware of every kind, from gigantic vases to the tiniest cups and saucers; ivory temples, and gods in silver and clay, crowded the drawing-rooms and the broad landings on the staircase. The curtains and chair-covers were of Indian embroidery; the carpets of oriental manufacture. Everything had a gaudy semi-barbarous aspect.

Mrs. Branston received her guests in the back drawing-room, a smaller and somewhat snugger

apartment than the spacious chamber in front, which was dimly visible in the light of a single moderator lamp and the red glow of a fire through the wide-open archway between the two rooms. In the inner room the lamps were brighter, and the fire burned cheerily; and here Mrs. Branston had established for herself a comfortable nook in a deep velvet-cushioned arm-chair, very low and capacious, sheltered luxuriously from possible draughts by a high seven-leaved Japanese screen. The fair Adela was a chilly personage, and liked to bask in her easy-chair before the fire. She looked very pretty this evening, in her dense black dress, with the airiest pretence of a widow's cap perched on her rich auburn hair, and a voluminous Indian shawl of vivid scarlet making a drapery about her shoulders. She was evidently very pleased to see John Saltram, and gave a cordial welcome to his friend. On the opposite side of the fireplace there was a tall rather grim-looking lady, also in mourning, and with an elaborate head-dress of bugles and ornaments of a feathery and beady nature, which were supposed to be flowers. About her neck this lady wore numerous rows of jet beads, from which depended crosses

and lockets of the same material; she had jet earrings and jet bracelets; and had altogether a beaded and bugled appearance, which would have been eminently fascinating to the untutored taste of a North-American Indian.

This lady was Mrs. Pallinson, a widow of limited means, and a distant relation of Adela Branston's. Left quite alone after her husband's death, and feeling herself thoroughly helpless, Adela had summoned this experienced matron to her aid; whereupon Mrs. Pallinson had given up a small establishment in the far north of London, which she was in the habit of speaking about on occasions as her humble dwelling, and had taken up her quarters in Cavendish-square, where she was a power of dread to the servants.

Gilbert fancied that Mrs. Pallinson was by no means too favourably disposed towards John Saltram. She had sharp black eyes, very much like the jet beads with which her person was decorated, and with these she kept a close watch upon Mrs. Branston and Mr. Saltram when the two were talking together. Gilbert saw how great an effort it cost her at these times to keep up the commonplace conversation which he had commenced with

her, and how intently she was trying to listen to the talk upon the other side of the fireplace.

The dinner was an admirable one, the wines perfection, Mr. Branston having been a past-master of the art of good living, and having stocked his cellars which a view to a much longer life than had been granted to him; the attendance was careful and complete; the dining-room, with its rather old-fashioned furniture and heavy crimson hangings, a picture of comfort; and Mrs. Branston a most charming hostess. Even Gilbert was fain to forget his own troubles and enjoy life a little in that agreeable society.

The two gentlemen accompanied the ladies back to the drawing-room. There was a grand piano in the front room, and to this Adela Branston went at Mr. Saltram's request, and began to play some of Handel's oratorio music, while he stood beside the piano, talking to her as she played. Mrs. Pallinson and Gilbert were thus left alone in the back room, and the lady did her best to improve the occasion by extorting what information she could from Mr. Fenton about his friend.

'Adela tells me that you and Mr. Saltram are

friends of very long standing, Mr. Fenton,' she began, fanning herself slowly with a shining black fan as she sat opposite Gilbert, awful of aspect in the sombre splendour of her beads and bugles.

' Yes; we were at Oxford together, and have been fast friends ever since.'

' Indeed!—how really delightful! The young men of the present day appear to me generally so incapable of a sincere friendship. And you and Mr. Saltram have been friends all that time? He is a literary man, I understand. I have not had the pleasure of reading any of his works; but Adela tells me he is extremely clever.'

' He is very clever.'

' And steady, I hope. Literary men are so apt to be wild and dissipated; and Adela has such a high opinion of your friend. I hope he is steady.'

' I scarcely know what a lady's notion of steadiness may involve,' Gilbert answered, smiling; ' but I daresay when my friend marries he will be steady enough. I cannot see that literary tastes and dissipated habits have any natural affinity. I should rather imagine that a man with resources of that kind would be likely to lead a quieter life than a man without such resources.'

'Do you really think so? I fancied that artists and poets and people of that kind were altogether a dangerous class. And you think that Mr. Saltram will be steady when he is married? He is engaged to be married, I conclude by your manner of saying that.'

'I had no idea my words implied anything of the kind. No, I do not think John Saltram is engaged.'

Mrs. Pallinson glanced towards the piano, where the two figures seemed very close to each other in the dim light of the room. Adela's playing had been going on in a desultory kind of manner, broken every now and then by her conversation with John Saltram, and had evidently been intended to give pleasure only to that one listener.

While she was still playing in this careless fitful way, a servant announced Mr. Pallinson; and a gentleman entered whom Gilbert had no difficulty in recognising as the son of the lady he had been conversing with. This new-comer was a tall pale-faced young man, with intensely penetrating black eyes exactly like his mother's, sharp well-cut features, and an extreme precision of dress

and manner. His hands, which were small and thin, were remarkable for their whiteness, and were set-off by spotless wristbands, which it was his habit to smooth fondly with his slim fingers in the intervals of his discourse. Mrs. Pallinson rose and embraced this gentleman with stately affection.

‘ My son Theobald—Mr. Fenton,’ she said. ‘ My son is a medical practitioner, residing at Maida-hill ; and it is a pleasure to him to spend an occasional evening with his cousin Adela and myself.’

‘ Whenever the exigences of professional life leave me free to enjoy that happiness,’ Mr. Pallinson added in a brisk semi-professional manner. ‘ Adela has been giving you some music, I see. I heard one of Handel’s choruses as I came upstairs.’

He went into the front drawing-room, shook hands with Mrs. Branston, and established himself with a permanent air beside the piano. Adela did not seem particularly glad to see him ; and John Saltram, who had met him before in Cavendish-square, received him with supreme indifference.

'I am blessed, as I daresay you perceive, Mr. Fenton, in my only son,' Mrs. Pallinson said, when the young man had withdrawn to the adjoining apartment. 'It was my misfortune to lose an admirable husband very early in life; and I have been ever since that loss wholly devoted to my son Theobald. My care has been amply rewarded by his goodness. He is a most estimable and talented young man, and has already attained an excellent position in the medical profession.'

'You have reason to be proud of him,' Gilbert answered kindly.

'*I am* proud of him, Mr. Fenton. He is the sole delight and chief object of my life. His career up to this hour has been all that the fondest mother could desire. If I can only see him happily and advantageously married, I shall have nothing left to wish for.'

'Indeed!' thought Gilbert. 'Then I begin to perceive the reason of Mrs. Pallinson's anxiety about John Saltram. She wants to secure Mrs. Branston's handsome fortune for this son of hers. Not much chance of that, I think, fascinating as the doctor may be. Plain John Saltram stands to win that prize.'

They went into the front drawing-room presently, and heard Mr. Pallinson play the ‘Hallelujah chorus,’ arranged as a duet, with his cousin. He was a young man who possessed several accomplishments in a small way—could sing a little, and play the piano and guitar a little, sketch a little, and was guilty of occasional effusions in the poetical line which were the palest, most invertebrate reflections of Owen Meredith. In the Maida-hill and St. John’s-wood districts he was accounted an acquisition for an evening-party; and his dulcet accents and engaging manners had rendered him a favourite with the young mothers of the neighbourhood, who believed implicitly in Mr. Pallinson’s gray powders when their little ones’ digestive organs had been impaired by injudicious diet, and confided in Mr. Pallinson’s carefully-expressed opinion as the fiat of an inscrutable power.

Mr. Theobald Pallinson himself cherished a very agreeable opinion of his own merits. Life seemed to him made on purpose that Theobald Pallinson should flourish and succeed therein. He could hardly have formed any idea of the world except as an arena for himself. He was not especially given to metaphysics; but it would not

have been very difficult for him to believe that the entire universe was an emanation from the brain of Theobald Pallinson—a phenomenal world existing only in his sense of sight and touch. Happy in this opinion of himself, it is not to be supposed that the surgeon had any serious doubt of ultimate success with his cousin. He regarded John Saltram as an interloper, who had gained ground in Mrs. Branston's favour only by the accident of his own absence from the stage. The Pallinsons had not been on visiting terms with Adela during the life of the East-India merchant, who had not shown himself favourably disposed to his wife's relations ; and by this means Mr. Saltram had enjoyed advantages which Theobald Pallinson told himself could not have been his, had he, Theobald, been at hand to engage his cousin's attention by those superior qualities of mind and person which must needs have utterly outshone the other. All that Mr. Pallinson wanted was opportunity ; and that being now afforded him, he looked upon the happy issue of events as a certainty, and already contemplated the house in Cavendish-square, the Indian jars and cabinets, the ivory chessmen and filigree-silver rosewater-bottles, the inlaid desks and Ja-

panese screens, the ponderous plate and rare old wines, with a sense of prospective proprietorship.

It seemed as if John Saltram had favoured this gentleman's views by his prolonged absence from the scene, holding himself completely aloof from Adela Branston at a time when, had he been inclined to press his suit, he might have followed her up closely. Mrs. Branston had been not a little wounded by this apparent neglect on the part of one whom she loved better than anything else in the world ; but she was inclined to believe anything rather than that John Saltram did not care for her ; and she had contrived to console herself with the idea that this avoidance of her had been prompted by a delicate consideration for her reputation, and a respect for the early period of her mourning. To-night, in his society, she had an air of happiness which became her wonderfully ; and Gilbert Fenton fancied that a man must needs be hard and cold whose heart could not be won by so bright and gracious a creature.

She spoke more than once, in a half-playful way, of Mr. Saltram's absence from London ; but the deeper feeling underneath the lightness of her manner was very evident to Gilbert.

'I suppose you will be running away from town again directly,' she said, 'without giving any one the faintest notice of your intention. I can't think what charm it is that you find in country life. I have so often heard you profess your indifference to shooting, and the ordinary routine of rustic existence. Perhaps the secret is, that you fear your reputation as a man of fashion would suffer were you to be seen in London at such a barbarous season as this.'

'I have never rejoiced in a reputation for fashion,' Mr. Saltram answered, with his quiet smile—a smile that gave a wonderful brightness to his face; 'and I think I like London in the autumn better than at any other time. One has room to move about. I have been in the country of late because I really do appreciate rural surroundings, and have found myself able to write better in the perfect quiet of rural life.'

'It is rather hard upon your friends that you should devote all your days to literature.'

'And still harder upon the reading public, perhaps. But, my dear Mrs. Branston, remember, I must write to live.'

Adela gave a little impatient sigh. She was

thinking how gladly she would have made this man master of her ample fortune; wondering whether he would ever claim from her the allegiance she was so ready to give.

Mr. Pallinson did his best to engage his cousin's attention during the rest of the evening. He brought her her tea-cup, and hovered about her while she sipped the beverage with that graceful air of suppressed tenderness which constant practice in the drawing-rooms of Maida-hill had rendered almost natural to him; but, do what he would, he could not distract Mrs. Branston's thoughts and looks from John Saltram. It was on him that her eyes were fixed while the accomplished Theobald was giving her a lively account of a concert at the Eyre Arms; and it was the fascination of his presence which made her answer at random to her cousin's questions about the last volume of the laureate's, which she had been lately reading. Even Mr. Pallinson, obtuse as he was apt to be when called upon to comprehend any fact derogatory to his own self-esteem, was fain to confess to himself that this evening's efforts were futile, and that this dark-faced stranger was the favourite for those matrimonial

stakes he had entered himself to run for. He looked at Mr. Saltram with a critical eye many times in the course of the evening, wondering what possible merit any sensible woman could perceive in such a man. But then, as Theobald Pallinson reflected, the misfortune is that so few women are sensible ; and it was gradually becoming evident to him that Michael Branston's widow was amongst the most foolish of her sex.

Mrs. Pallinson kept a sharp watch upon Adela throughout the evening, plunging into the conversation every now and then with a somewhat dictatorial and infallible air, and generally contriving to drag some praise of Theobald into her talk : now dilating rapturously upon that fever case which he had managed so wonderfully the other day, proving his judgment superior to that of an eminent consulting physician ; anon launching out into laudation of his last poem, which had been set to music by a young lady in St. John's-wood ; and by and by informing the company of her son's artistic talents, and his extraordinary capacity as a judge of pictures. To these things the surgeon himself listened with a deprecating air, smoothing his wristbands, and

caressing his slim white hands, while he playfully reproved his parent for her maternal weakness.

Mr. Pallinson held his ground near his cousin's chair till the last moment, while John Saltram sat apart by one of the tables, listlessly turning over a volume of engravings, and only looking up at long intervals to join in the conversation. He had an absent weary look, which puzzled Gilbert Fenton, who, being only a secondary personage in this narrow circle, had ample leisure to observe his friend.

The three gentlemen left at the same time, Mr. Pallinson driving away in a neat miniature brougham, after politely offering to convey his cousin's guests to their destination. It was a bright starlight night, and Gilbert walked to the Temple with John Saltram, through the quietest of the streets leading eastwards. They lit their cigars as they left the square, and walked for some time in a friendly companionable silence. When they did speak, their talk was naturally of Adela Branston.

'I thought she was really charming to-night,' Gilbert said, 'in spite of that fellow's efforts to

absorb her attention. It is pretty easy to see how the land lies in that direction ; and if such a rival were likely to injure you, you have a very determined one in Mr. Pallinson.'

' Yes ; the surgeon has evidently fixed his hopes upon poor old Michael Branston's money. But I don't think he will succeed.'

' You will not allow him to do so, I hope ?'

' I don't know about that. Then you really admire the little woman, Gilbert ?'

' Very much ; as much as I have ever admired any woman except Marian Nowell.'

' Ah, your Marian is a star, single and alone in her brightness, like that planet up yonder ! But Adela Branston is a good little soul, and will make a charming wife. Gilbert, I wish to heaven you would fall in love with her !'

Gilbert Fenton stared aghast at his companion, as he tossed the end of his cigar into the gutter.

' Why, John, you must be mad to say such a thing.'

' No, it is by no means a mad notion. I want to see you cured, Gilbert. I do like you, dear boy, you know, as much as it is possible for a

selfish worthless fellow like me to like any man. I would give a great deal to see you happy; and I am sure that you might be so as Adela Branston's husband. I grant you that I am the favourite at present; but she is just the sort of woman to be won by any man who would really prove himself worthy of her. Her liking for me is a mere idle fancy, which would soon die out for want of fuel. You are my superior in every way —younger, handsomer, better. Why should you not go in for this thing, Gil?

'Because I have no heart to give any woman, John. And even if I were free, I would not give my heart to a woman whose affection had to be diverted from another channel before it could be bestowed upon me. I can't imagine what has put such a preposterous idea into your head, or why it is that you shrink from improving your own chances with Mrs. Branston.'

'You must not wonder at anything that I do or say, Gilbert. It is my nature to do strange things—my destiny to take the wrong turning in life!'

'When shall I see you again?' Gilbert asked, when they were parting at the Temple gates.

'I can scarcely tell you that. I must go back to Oxford to-morrow.'

'So soon?'

'Yes, my work gets on better down there. I will let you know directly I return to London.'

On this they parted, Gilbert considerably mystified by his friend's conduct, but not caring to push his questions farther. He had his own affairs to think of: that one business which absorbed almost the whole of his thoughts—the business of his search for the man who had robbed him of his promised wife. This interval, in which he remained inactive, devoting himself to the duties of his commercial life, was only a pause in his labours. He was not the less bent upon bringing about a face-to-face meeting between himself and Marian's husband because of this brief suspension of his efforts.

CHAPTER XIV.

FATHER AND SON.

WHILE Gilbert Fenton was deliberating what steps to take next in his quest of his unknown enemy, a gentleman arrived at a small hotel near Charing-cross—a gentleman who was evidently a stranger to England, and whose portmanteaus and other travelling paraphernalia bore the names of New York manufacturers. He was a portly individual of middle age, and was still eminently handsome. He dressed well, lived expensively, and had altogether a prosperous appearance. He took care to inform the landlord of the hotel that he was not an American, but had returned to the land of his birth after an absence of something like fifteen years, and after realising a handsome fortune upon the other side of the Atlantic. He was a very gracious and communicative person, and seemed to take life in an easy agreeable manner, like a man whose habit it was to look on the

brighter side of all things, provided his own comfort was secured. Norton Percival was the name on this gentleman's luggage, and on the card which he gave to the waiter whom he desired to look after his letters. After dining sumptuously on the evening of his arrival in London, this Mr. Percival strolled out in the autumn darkness, and made his way through the more obscure streets between Charing-cross and Wardour-street. The way seemed familiar enough to him, and he only paused now and then to take note of some alteration in the buildings which he had to pass. The last twenty years have not made much change in this neighbourhood, and the traveller from New York found little to surprise him.

'The place looks just as dull and dingy as it used to look when I was a lad,' he said to himself. 'I daresay I shall find the old court unchanged in all these years. But shall I find the old man alive? I doubt that. Dead more likely, and his money gone to strangers. I wonder whether he had much money, or whether he was really as poor as he made himself out. It's difficult to say. I know I made him bleed pretty freely, at one time and another, before he turned

rusty; and it's just possible I may have had pretty nearly all he had to give.'

He was in Wardour-street by this time, looking at the dimly-lighted shops where broker's ware of more or less value, old oak carvings, doubtful pictures, and rusted armour loomed duskily upon the passer-by. At the corner of Queen-Anne's-court he paused, and peered curiously into the narrow alley.

'The court is still here, at any rate,' he muttered to himself, 'and I shall soon settle the other question.'

His heart beat faster than it was wont to beat as he drew near his destination. Was it any touch of real feeling, or only selfish apprehension, that quickened its throbbing? The man's life had been so utterly reckless of others, that it would be dangerous to give him credit for any affectionate yearning—any natural remorseful pang in such a moment as this. He had lived for self, and self alone; and his own interests were involved in the issue of to-night.

A few steps brought him before Jacob Nowell's window. Yes, it was just as he remembered it twenty years before—the same dingy old silver,

the same little heap of gold, the same tray of tarnished jewelry glimmered in the faint light of a solitary gas-burner behind the murky glass. On the door-plate there was still Jacob Nowell's name. Yet all this might mean nothing. The grave might have closed over the old silversmith, and the interest of trade necessitate the preservation of the familiar name.

The gentleman calling himself Percival went into the shop. How well he remembered the sharp jangling sound of the bell ! and how intensely he had hated it and all the surroundings of his father's sordid life in the days when he was pursuing his headlong career as a fine gentleman, and only coming to Queen-Anne's-court for money ! He remembered what an incubus the shop had been upon him ; what a pursuing phantom and perpetual image of his degradation in the days of his university life, when he was incessantly haunted by the dread that his father's social status would be discovered. The atmosphere of the place brought back all the old feelings, and he was young again, a nervous suppliant for money, which was likely to be refused to him.

The sharp peal of the bell produced Mr. Luke

Tulliver, who emerged from a little den in a corner at the back of the shop, where he had been engaged copying items into a stock-book by the light of a solitary tallow-candle. The stranger looked like a customer, and Mr. Tulliver received him graciously, turning up the gas over the counter, which had been burning at a diminished and economical rate hitherto.

‘Did you wish to look at anything in antique silver, sir?’ he asked briskly. ‘We have some very handsome specimens of the Queen Anne period.’

‘No, I don’t want to look at anything. I want to know whether Jacob Nowell is still living?’

‘Yes, sir. Mr. Nowell is my master. You might have noticed his name upon the door-plate if you had looked. Do you wish to see him?’

‘I do. Tell him that I am an old friend, just come from America.’

Luke Tulliver went into the parlour behind the half-glass door, Norton Percival following upon him closely. He heard the old man’s voice saying,

‘I have no friend in America; but you may tell the person to come in; I will see him.’

The voice trembled a little; and the silver-

smith had raised himself from his chair, and was looking eagerly towards the door as Norton Percival entered, not caring to wait for any more formal invitation. The two men faced each other silently in the dim light from one candle on the mantelpiece, Jacob Nowell looking intently at the bearded face of his visitor.

‘ You can go, Tulliver,’ he said sharply to the shopman. ‘ I wish to be alone with this gentleman.’

Luke Tulliver departed with his usual reluctant air, closing the door as slowly as it was possible for him to close it, and staring at the stranger till the last moment that it was possible for him to stare.

When he was gone the old man took the candle from the mantelpiece, and held it up before the bearded face of the traveller.

‘ Yes, yes, yes,’ he said slowly; ‘ at last ! It is you, Percival, my only son. I thought you were dead long ago. I had a right to consider you dead.’

‘ If I had thought my existence could be a matter of interest to you, I should hardly have so long refrained from all communication with you.

But your letters led me to suppose you utterly indifferent to my fate.'

'I offered you and your wife a home.'

'Yes, but on conditions that were impossible to me. I had some pride in those days. My education had not fitted me to stand behind a counter and drive hard bargains with dealers of doubtful honesty. Nor could I bring my wife to such a home as this.'

'The time came when you left that poor creature without any home,' said the old man sternly.

'Necessity has no law, my dear father. You may imagine that my life, without a profession and without any reliable resources, has been rather precarious. When I seem to have acted worst, I have been only the slave of circumstances.'

'Indeed! and have you no pity for the fate of your wife, no interest in the life of your only child?'

'My wife was a poor helpless creature, who contrived to make my life wretched,' Mr. Nowell, alias Percival, answered coolly. 'I gave her every sixpence I possessed when I sent her home to England; but luck went dead against me for a long time after that, and I could neither send her

money nor go to her. When I heard of her death, I heard in an indirect way that my child had been adopted by some old fool of a half-pay officer ; and I was naturally glad of an accident which relieved me of a heavy incubus. An opportunity occurred about the same time of my entering on a tolerably remunerative career as agent for some Belgian ironworks in America ; and I had no option but to close with the offer at once or lose the chance altogether. I sailed for New York within a fortnight after poor Lucy's death, and have lived in America for the last fifteen years. I have contrived to establish a tolerably flourishing trade there on my own account ; a trade that only needs capital to become one of the first in New York.'

'Capital !' echoed Jacob Nowell ; 'I thought there was something wanted. It would have been a foolish fancy to suppose that affection could have had anything to do with your coming to me.'

'My dear father, it is surely possible that affection and interest may sometimes go together. Were I a pauper, I would not venture to present myself before you at all ; but as a tolerably prosperous trader, with the ability to propose an

alliance that should be to our mutual advantage, I considered I might fairly approach you.'

'I have no money to invest in your trade,' the old man answered sternly. 'I am a very poor man, impoverished for life by the wicked extravagance of your youth. If you have come to me with any hope of obtaining money from me, you have wasted time and trouble.'

'Let that subject drop, then,' Percival Nowell said lightly. 'I suppose you have some remnant of regard for me, in spite of our old misunderstanding, and that my coming is not quite indifferent to you ?'

'No,' the other answered, with a touch of melancholy; 'it is not indifferent to me. I have waited for your return these many years. You might have found me more tenderly disposed towards you, had you come earlier; but there are some feelings which seem to wear out as a man grows older,—affections that grow paler day by day, like colours fading in the sun. Still, I am glad to see you once more before I die. You are my only son, and you must needs be something nearer to me than the rest of the world, in spite of all that I have suffered at your hands.'

'I could not come back to England sooner than this,' the younger man said presently. 'I had a hard battle to fight out yonder.'

There had been very little appearance of emotion upon either side so far. Percival Nowell took things as coolly as it was his habit to take everything, while his father carefully concealed whatever deeper feeling might be stirred in the depths of his heart by this unexpected return.

'You do not ask any questions about the fate of your only child,' the old man said by and by.

'My dear father, that is of course a subject of lively interest to me; but I did not suppose that you could be in a position to give me any information upon that point.'

'I do happen to know something about your daughter, but not much.'

Jacob Nowell went on to tell his son all that he had heard from Gilbert Fenton respecting Marian's marriage. Of his own advertisements, and wasted endeavours to find her, he said nothing.

'And this fellow whom she has jilted is pretty well off, I suppose?' Percival said thoughtfully.

‘ He is an Australian merchant, and, I should imagine, in prosperous circumstances.’

‘ Foolish girl ! And this Holbrook is no doubt an adventurer, or he would scarcely have married her in such a secret way. Have you any wish that she should be found ?’

‘ Yes ; I have a fancy for seeing her before I die. She is my own flesh and blood, like you, and has not injured me as you have. I should like to see her.’

‘ And if she happened to take your fancy, you would leave her all your money, I suppose ?’

‘ Who told you that I have money to leave ?’ cried the old man sharply. ‘ Have I not said that I am a poor man, hopelessly impoverished by your extravagance ?’

‘ Bah, my dear father, that is all nonsense. My extravagance is a question of nearly twenty years ago. If I had swamped all you possessed in those days—which I don’t for a moment believe—you have had ample time to make a fresh fortune since then. You would never have lived all these years in Queen-Anne’s-court except for the sake of money-making. Why, the place stinks of money. I know your tricks : buying silver

from men who are in too great a hurry to sell it to be particular about the price ; lending money at sixty per cent, a sixty which comes to eighty before the transaction is finished. A man does not lead such a life as yours for nothing. You are rolling in money, and you mean to punish me by leaving it all to Marian.'

The silversmith grew pale with anger during this speech of his son's.

' You are a consummate scoundrel,' he said, ' and are at liberty to think what you please. I tell you once for all, I am as poor as Job. But if I had a million, I would not leave you sixpence of it.'

' So be it,' the other answered gaily. ' I have not performed the duties of a parent very punctually hitherto ; but I don't mind taking some trouble to find this girl while I am in England, in order that she may not lose her chances with you.'

' You need give yourself no trouble on that score. Mr. Fenton has promised to find her for me.'

' Indeed ! I should like to see this Mr. Fenton.'

' You can see him if you please ; but you are

scarcely likely to get a warm reception in that quarter. Mr. Fenton knows what you have been to your daughter and to me.'

' I am not going to fling myself into his arms. I only want to hear all he can tell me about Marian.'

' How long do you mean to stay in England ?'

' That is entirely dependent upon the result of my visit. I had hoped that if I found you living, which I most earnestly desired might be the case, I should find in you a friend and coadjutor. I am employed in starting a great iron company, which is likely—I may say certain—to result in large gains to all concerned in it ; and I fancied I should have no difficulty in securing your coöperation. There are the prospectuses of the scheme' (he flung a heap of printed papers on the table before his father), ' and there is not a line in them that I cannot guarantee on my credit as a man of business. You can look over them at your leisure, or not, as you please. I think you must know that I always had an independent spirit, and would be the last of mankind to degrade myself by any servile attempt to alter your line of conduct towards me.'

' Independent spirit ! Yes ! ' cried the old

man in a mocking tone ; ‘ a son extorts every six-pence he can from his father and mother—ay, Percy, from his weak loving mother ; I know who robbed me to send you money—and then, when he can extort no more, boasts of his independence. But that will do. There is no need that we should quarrel. After twenty years’ severance, we can afford to let bygones be bygones. I have told you that I am glad to see you. If you come to me with disinterested feelings, that is enough. You may take back your prospectuses. I have nothing to embark in Yankee speculations. If your scheme is a good one, you will find plenty of enterprising spirits willing to join you ; if it is a bad one, I daresay you will contrive to find dupes. You can come and see me again when you please. And now good-night. I find this kind of talk rather tiring at my age.’

‘ One word before I leave you,’ said Percival. ‘ On reflection, I think it will be as well to say nothing about my presence in England to this Mr. Fenton. I shall be more free to hunt for Marian without his coöperation, even supposing he were inclined to give it. You have told me all that he could tell me, I daresay.’

‘I believe I have.’

‘Precisely. Therefore no possible good could come of an encounter between him and me, and I shall be glad if you will keep my name dark.’

‘As you please, though I can see no reason for secrecy in the matter.’

‘It is not a question of secrecy, but only of prudential reserve.’

‘It may be as you wish,’ answered the old man carelessly. ‘Good-night.’

He shook hands with his son, who departed without having broken bread in his father’s house, a little dashed by the coldness of his reception, but not entirely without hope that some profit might arise to him out of this connection in the future.

‘The girl must be found,’ he said to himself. ‘I am convinced there has been a great fortune made in that dingy hole. Better that it should go to her than to a stranger. I’m very sorry she’s married; but if this Holbrook is the adventurer I suppose him, the marriage may come to nothing. Yes; I must find her. A father returned from foreign lands is rather a romantic notion—the sort of notion a girl is pretty sure to take kindly to.’

CHAPTER XV.

ON THE TRACK.

GILBERT FENTON saw no more of his friend John Saltram after that Sunday evening which they had spent together in Cavendish-square. He called upon Mrs. Braniston before the week was ended, and was so fortunate as to find that lady alone ; Mrs. Pallinson having gone on a shopping expedition in her kinswoman's dashing brougham.

The pretty little widow received Gilbert very graciously ; but there was a slight shade of melancholy in her manner, a pensiveness which softened and refined her, Gilbert thought. Nor was it long before she allowed him to discover the cause of her sadness. After a little conventional talk upon indifferent subjects, she began to speak of John Saltram.

‘ Have you seen much of your friend Mr. Saltram since Sunday ?’ she asked, with that vain en-

deavour to speak carelessly with which a woman generally betrays her real feeling.

‘I have not seen him at all since Sunday. He told me he was going back to Oxford—or the neighbourhood of Oxford, I believe—almost immediately; and I have not troubled myself to hunt him up at his chambers.’

‘Gone back already!’ Mrs. Branston exclaimed, with a disappointed petulant look that was half-childish, half-womanly. ‘I cannot imagine what charm he finds in a dull village on the banks of the river. He has confessed that the place is the dreariest and most obscure in the world, and that he has neither shooting nor any other kind of amusement. There must be some mysterious attraction, Mr. Fenton. I think your friend is a good deal changed of late. Haven’t you found him so?’

‘No, Mrs. Branston, I cannot say that I have discovered any marked alteration in him since my return from Australia. John Saltram was always wayward and fitful. He may have been a little more so lately, perhaps, but that is all.’

‘You have a very high opinion of him, I suppose?’

'He is very dear to me. We are something more than friends in the ordinary acceptation of the word. Do you remember the story of those two noble young Venetians who inscribed upon their shield *Fratres, non amici?* Saltram and I have been brothers rather than friends.'

'And you think him a good man?' Adela asked anxiously.

'Most decidedly; I have reason to think so. I believe him to be a noble-hearted and honourable man; a little neglectful or disdainful of conventionalities, wearing his faith in God and his more sacred feelings anywhere than upon his sleeve; but a man who cannot fail to come right in the long-run.'

'I am so glad to hear you say that. I have known Mr. Saltram some time, as you may have heard, and like him very much. But my cousin Mrs. Pallinson has quite an aversion to him, and speaks against him with such a positive air at times, that I have been almost inclined to think she must be right. I am very inexperienced in the ways of the world, and am naturally disposed to lean a little upon the opinions of others.'

‘But don’t you think there may be a reason for Mrs. Pallinson’s dislike of my friend?’

Adela Branston blushed at this question, and then laughed a little.

‘I think I know what you mean,’ she said. ‘Yes, it is just possible that Mrs. Pallinson may be jealously disposed towards any acquaintance of mine, on account of that paragon of perfection, her son Theobald. I have not been so blind as not to see her views in that quarter. But be assured, Mr. Fenton, that whatever may happen to me, I shall never become Mrs. Theobald Pallinson.’

‘I hope not. I am quite ready to acknowledge Mr. Pallinson’s merits and accomplishments, but I do not think him worthy of you.’

‘It is rather awful, isn’t it, for me to speak of marriage at all within a few months of my husband’s death? But when a woman has money, people will not allow her to forget that she is a widow for ever so short a time. But it is quite a question if I shall ever marry again. I have very little doubt that real happiness is most likely to be found in a wise avoidance of all the perils and perplexities of that foolish passion which we read

of in novels, if one could only be wise ; don't you think so, Mr. Fenton ?'

' My own experience inclines me to agree with you, Mrs. Branston,' Gilbert answered, smiling at the little woman's naïveté.

' Your own experience has been unfortunate, then ? I wish I were worthy of your confidence. Mr. Saltram told me some time ago that you were engaged to a very charming young lady.'

' The young lady in question has jilted me.'

' Indeed ! And you are very angry with her, of course ?'

' I loved her too well to be angry with her. I reserve my indignation for the scoundrel who stole her from me.'

' It is very generous of you to make excuses for the lady,' Mrs. Branston said ; and would fain have talked longer of this subject, but Gilbert concluded his visit at this juncture, not caring to discuss his troubles with the sympathetic widow.

He left the great gloomy gorgeous house in Cavendish-square more than ever convinced of Adela Branston's affection for his friend, more than ever puzzled by John Saltram's indifference to so advantageous an alliance.

Within a few days of this visit Gilbert Fenton left London. He had devoted himself unflinchingly to his business since his return to England, and had so planned and organised his affairs as to be able now to absent himself for some little time from the City. He was going upon what most men would have called a fool's errand—his quest of Marian's husband ; but he was going with a steady purpose in his breast—a determination never to abandon this search till it should result in success. He might have to suspend it from time to time, should he determine to continue his commercial career ; but the purpose would be nevertheless the ruling influence of his life.

He had but one clue for his guidance in setting out upon this voyage of discovery. Miss Long had told him that the newly-married couple were to go to some farmhouse in Hampshire, which had been lent to Mr. Holbrook by a friend. It was in Hampshire, therefore, that Gilbert resolved to make his first inquiries. He told himself that success was merely a question of time and patience. The business of tracing these people, who were not to be found by any public inquiry, would be slow and wearisome no doubt. He was

prepared for that. He was prepared for a thousand failures and disappointments before he alighted on the one place in which Mr. Holbrook's name must needs be known, the town or village nearest to the farmhouse that had been lent to him. And even if, after unheard-of trouble and perseverance on his part, he should find the place he wanted, it was quite possible that Marian and her husband would have gone elsewhere, and his quest would have to begin afresh. But he fancied that he could hardly fail to obtain some information as to their plan of life, if he could find the place where they had stayed after their marriage.

His own scheme of action was simple enough. He had only to travel from place to place, making careful inquiries at post-offices and in all likely quarters at every stage of his journey. He went straight to Winchester, having a fancy for the quiet old city and the fair pastoral scenery surrounding it, and thinking that Mr. Holbrook's borrowed retreat might possibly be in this neighbourhood. The business proved even slower and more tedious than he had supposed; there were so many farms round about Winchester, so many places which seemed likely enough, and to which

he went, only to find that no person of the name of Holbrook had ever been heard of by the inhabitants.

He made his head-quarters in the cathedral city for nearly a week, and explored the country round, in a radius of thirty miles, without the faintest success. It was fine autumn weather, calm and clear, the foliage still upon the trees, in all its glory of gold and brown, with patches of green lingering here and there in sheltered places. The country was very beautiful, and Gilbert Fenton's work would have been pleasant enough if the elements of peace had been in his breast. But they were not. Bitter regrets for all he had lost, uneasy fears and wild imaginings about the fate of her whom he still loved with a fond useless passion,—these and other gloomy thoughts haunted him day by day, clouding the calm loveliness of the scenes on which he looked, until all outer things seemed to take their colour from his own mind. He had loved Marian Nowell as it is not given to many men to love; and with the loss of her, it seemed to him as if the very springs of his life were broken. All the machinery of his existence was loosened and out of gear, and he

could scarcely have borne the dreary burden of his days, had it not been for that one feverish hope of finding the man who had wronged him.

The week ended without bringing him in the smallest degree nearer the chance of success. Happily for himself, he had not expected to succeed in a week. On leaving Winchester he started on a kind of vagabond tour through the county, on a horse which he hired in the cathedral city, and which carried him from twenty to thirty miles a day. This mode of travelling enabled him to explore obscure villages and out-of-the-way places that lay off the line of railway. Everywhere he made the same inquiries, everywhere with the same result. Another week came to an end. He had made his voyage of discovery through more than half of the county, as his pocket-map told him, and was still no nearer success than when he left London.

He spent his Sunday at a comfortable inn in a quiet little town, where there was a curious old church, and a fine peal of bells that seemed to him to be ringing all day long. It was a dull rainy day. He went to church in the morning, and in the afternoon stood at the coffee-room win-

dow watching the townspeople going by to their devotions in an absent unseeing way, and thinking of his own troubles ; pausing, just a little, now and then, from that egotistical brooding to wonder how these people endured the dull monotonous round of their lives, and what crosses and disappointments they had to suffer in their small obscure way.

The inn was very empty, and the landlord waited upon Mr. Fenton in person at his dinner. Gilbert had the coffee-room all to himself, and it looked comfortable enough when the curtains were drawn, the lamps lighted, and the small dinner-table wheeled in front of a blazing fire.

'I have been thinking over what you were asking me last night, sir,' the host of the White Swan began, while Gilbert was eating his fish ; 'and though I can't say that I ever heard the name of Holbrook, I fancy I may have seen the lady and gentleman you are looking for.'

'Indeed !' exclaimed Gilbert eagerly, pushing away his plate, and turning full on the landlord.

'I hope you won't let me spoil your dinner, sir ; I know that sole's fresh. I'm a pretty good judge of those things, and choose every bit of fish

that's cooked in this house. But as I was saying, sir, with regard to this lady and gentleman, I think you said that the people you are looking for were strangers to this part of the country, and were occupying a farmhouse that had been lent to them.'

'Precisely.'

'Well, sir, I remember some time in the early part of the year, I think it must have been about March—'

'Yes, the people I am looking for would have arrived in March.'

'Indeed, sir! That makes it seem likely. I remember a lady and gentleman coming here from the railway station—we've got a station close by our town, as you know, sir, I daresay. They wanted a fly to take them and their luggage on somewhere—I can't for the life of me remember the name of the place—but it was a ten-mile drive, and it was a farm—that I could swear to—Something Farm. If it had been a place I'd known, I think I should have remembered the name.'

'Can I see the man who drove them?' Gilbert asked quickly.

‘The young man that drove them, sir, has left me, and has left these parts a month come next Tuesday. Where he has gone is more than I can tell you. He was very good with horses; but he turned out badly, cheated me up hill and down dale, as you may say—though what hills and dales have got to do with it is more than I can tell—and I was obliged to get rid of him.’

‘That’s provoking. But if the people I want are anywhere within ten miles of this place, I don’t suppose I should be long finding them. Yet the mere fact of two strangers coming here, and going on to some place called a farm, seems very slight ground to go upon. The month certainly corresponds with the time at which Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook came to Hampshire. Did you take any particular notice of them?’

‘I took particular notice of the lady. She was as pretty a woman as ever I set eyes upon—quite a girl. I noticed that the gentleman was very careful and tender with her when he put her into the carriage, wrapping her up, and so on. He looked a good deal older than her, and I didn’t much like his looks altogether.’

‘Could you describe him?’

'Well—no, sir. The time was short, and he was wrapped up a good deal; the collar of his overcoat turned up, and a scarf round his neck. He had dark eyes, I remember, and rather a stern look in them.'

This was rather too vague a description to make any impression upon Gilbert. It was something certainly to know that his rival had dark eyes, if indeed this man of whom the landlord spoke really were his rival. He had never been able to make any mental picture of the stranger who had come between him and his betrothed. He had been inclined to fancy that the man must needs be much handsomer than himself, possessed of every outward attribute calculated to subjugate the mind of an inexperienced girl like Marian; but the parish-clerk at Wygrove and Miss Long had both spoken in a disparaging tone of Mr. Holbrook's personal appearance; and, remembering this, he was fain to believe that Marian had been won by some charm more subtle than that of a handsome face.

He went on eating his dinner in silence for some little time, meditating upon what the landlord had told him. Then, as the man cleared the

table, lingering over his work, as if eager to impart any stray scraps of information he might possess, Gilbert spoke to him again.

'I should have fancied that, as a settled inhabitant of the place, you would be likely to know every farm and farmhouse within ten miles—or within twenty miles,' he said.

'Well, sir, I daresay I do know the neighbourhood pretty well, in a general way. But I think, if I'd known the name of the place this lady and gentleman were going to, it would have struck me more than it did, and I should have remembered it. I was uncommonly busy through that afternoon, for it was market-day, and there were a mort of people going in and out. I never did interfere much with the fly business ; it was only by taking the gentleman out some soda - and - brandy that I came to take the notice I did of the lady's looks and his care of her. I know it was a ten-mile drive, and that I told the gentleman the fare, so as there might be no bother between him and William Tyler, my man, at the end ; and he agreed to it in a liberal off-hand kind of way, like a man who doesn't care much for money. As to farms within ten miles of here, there are

a dozen at least, one way and another—some small, and some large.'

'Do you know of any place in the ownership of a gentleman who would be likely to lend his house to a friend ?'

'I can't say I do, sir. They're tenant-farmers about here mostly, and rather a roughish lot, as you may say. There's a place over beyond Crosber, ten miles off and more; I don't know the name of it, or the person it belongs to; but I've noticed it many a time as I've driven by; a curious old-fashioned house, standing back off one of the lanes out of Crosber, with a large garden before it. A queer lonesome place altogether. I should take it to be two or three hundred years old; and I shouldn't think the house had had money spent upon it within the memory of man. It's a dilapidated tumbledown old gazabo of a place, and yet there's a kind of prettiness about it in summer-time, when the garden is full of flowers. There's a river runs through some of the land about half a mile from the house.'

'What kind of a place is Crosber ?'

'A bit of a village on the road from here to Portsmouth. The house I'm telling you about is

a mile from Crosber at the least, away from the main road. There's two or three lanes or by-roads about there, and it lies in one of them that turns sharp off by the Blue Boar, which is about the only inn where you can bait a horse thereabouts.'

'I'll ride over there to-morrow morning, and have a look at this queer old house. You might give me the names of any other farms you know about this neighbourhood, and their occupants.'

This the landlord was very ready to do. He ran over the names of from ten to fifteen places, which Gilbert jotted down upon a leaf of his pocket-book, afterwards planning his route upon the map of the county which he carried for his guidance. He set out early the next morning under a low gray sky, with clouds in the distance that threatened rain. The road from the little market-town to Crosber possessed no especial beauty. The country was flat and uninteresting about here, and needed the glory of its summer verdure to brighten and embellish it. But Mr. Fenton did not give much thought to the scenes through which he went at this time; the world around and about him was all of one colour—the

sunless gray which pervaded his own life. To-day the low dull sky and the threatening clouds far away upon the level horizon harmonised well with his own thoughts—with the utter hopelessness of his mind. Hopelessness!—yes, that was the word. He had hazarded all upon this one chance, and its failure was the shipwreck of his life. The ruin was complete. He could not build-up a new scheme of happiness. In the full maturity of his manhood, his fate had come to him. He was not the kind of man who can survive the ruin of his plans, and begin afresh with other hopes and still fairer dreams. It was his nature to be constant. In all his life he had chosen for himself only one friend—in all his life he had loved but one woman.

He came to the little village, with its low sloping - roofed cottages, whose upper stories abutted upon the road and overshadowed the casements below; and where here and there a few pennyworths of gingerbread, that seemed mouldy with the mould of ages, a glass pickle-bottle of bull's-eyes or sugar-sticks, and half a dozen penny bottles of ink, indicated the commercial tendencies of Crosber. A little farther on, he came to

a rickety-looking corner-house, with a steep thatched roof overgrown by stonecrop and other parasites, which was evidently *the shop* of the village, inasmuch as one side of the window exhibited a show of homely drapery, while the other side was devoted to groceries, and a shelf above laden with great sprawling loaves of bread. This establishment was also the post-office, and here Gilbert resolved to make his customary inquiries, when he had put up his horse.

Almost immediately opposite this general emporium the sign of the Blue Boar swung proudly across the street in front of a low rather dilapidated-looking hostelry, with a wide frontage, and an archway leading into a spacious desolate yard, where one gloomy cock of Spanish descent was crowing hoarsely on the broken roof of a shed, surrounded by four or five shabby-looking hens, all in the most wobegone stage of moulting, and appearing as if eggs were utterly remote from their intentions. This Blue Boar was popularly supposed to have been a most distinguished and prosperous place in the coaching-days, when twenty coaches passed daily through the village of Crosber; and was even now much affected as

a place of resort by the villagers, to the sore vexation of the rector and such good people as believed in the perfectibility of the human race and the ultimate suppression of public-houses.

Here Mr. Fenton dismounted, and surrendered his horse to the keeping of an unkempt bare-headed youth who emerged from one of the dreary-looking buildings in the yard, announced himself as the hostler, and led off the steed in triumph to a wilderness of a stable, where the landlord's pony and a fine colony of rats were luxuriating in the space designed for some twelve or fifteen horses.

Having done this, Gilbert crossed the road to the post-office, where he found the proprietor, a deaf old man, weighing half-pounds of sugar in the background, while a brisk sharp-looking girl stood behind the counter sorting a little packet of letters.

It was to the damsel, as the more intelligent of these two, that Gilbert addressed himself, beginning of course with the usual question, Did she know any one, a stranger, sojourning in that neighbourhood called Holbrook?

The girl shook her head without a mo-

ment's hesitation. No, she knew no one of that name.

'And I suppose all the letters for people in this neighbourhood pass through your hands ?'

'Yes, sir, all of them ; I couldn't have failed to notice if there had been any one of that name.'

Gilbert gave a little weary sigh. The information given him by the landlord of the White Swan had seemed to bring him so very near the object of his search, and here he was thrown back all at once upon the wide field of conjecture, not a whit nearer any certain knowledge. It was true that Crosber was only one among several places within ten miles of the market-town, and the strangers who had been driven from the White Swan in March last might have gone to any one of those other localities.

His inquiries were not finished yet, however.

'There is an old house about a mile from here,' he said to the girl ; 'a house belonging to a farm, in the lane yonder that turns off by the Blue Boar. Have you any notion to whom it belongs, or who lives there ?'

'An old house in that lane across the way ?' the girl said, reflecting. 'That's Golder's-lane,

and leads to Golder's-green. There's not many houses there ; it's rather a lonesome kind of place. Do you mean a big old-fashioned house standing far back in a garden ?'

' Yes ; that must be the place I want to know about.'

' It must be the Grange, surely. It was a gentleman's house once ; but there's only a bailiff lives there now. The farm belongs to some gentleman down in Midlandshire, a baronet ; I can't call to mind his name at this moment, though I've heard it often enough. Mr. Carley's daughter —Carley is the name of the bailiff at the Grange —comes here for all they want.'

Gilbert gave a little start at the name of Midlandshire. Lidford was in Midlandshire. Was it not likely to be a Midlandshire man who had lent Marian's husband his house ?

' Do you know if these people at the Grange have had any one staying with them lately—any lodgers ?' he asked the girl.

' Yes ; they have lodgers pretty well every summer. There were some people this year, a lady and gentleman ; but they never seemed to have any letters, and I can't tell you their names.'

‘Are they living there still?’

‘I can’t tell you that. I used to see them at church now and then in the summer-time; but I haven’t seen them lately. There’s a church at Golder’s-green almost as near, and they have been there.’

‘Will you tell me what they were like?’ Gilbert asked eagerly.

His heart was beating loud and fast, making a painful tumult in his breast. He felt assured that he was on the track of the people whom the innkeeper had described to him; the people who were, in all probability, Mr. and Mrs. Holbrook.

‘The lady is very pretty and very young, quite a girl. The gentleman older, dark, and not handsome.’

‘Yes. Has the lady gray eyes, and dark-brown hair, and a very bright expressive face?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Pray try to remember the name of the gentleman to whom the Grange belongs. It is of great importance to me to know that.’

‘I’ll ask my father, sir,’ the girl answered good-naturedly; ‘he’s pretty sure to know.’

She went across the shop to the old man who

was weighing sugar, and bawled her question into his ear. He scratched his head in a meditative way for some moments.

'I've heard the name times and often,' he said, 'though I never set eyes upon the gentleman. William Carley has been bailiff at the Grange these twenty years, and I don't believe as the owner has ever come nigh the place in all that time. Let me see, it's a common name enough though the gentleman is a baronight. Forster—that's it—Sir something Forster.'

'Sir David?' cried Gilbert.

'You've hit it, sir. Sir David Forster—that's the gentleman.'

Sir David Forster! He had little doubt after this that the strangers at the Grange had been Marian and her husband. Treachery, blackest treachery somewhere. He had questioned Sir David, and had received his positive assurance that this man Holbrook was unknown to him; and now, against that there was the fact that the baronet was the owner of a place in Hampshire, to be taken in conjunction with that other fact that a place in Hampshire had been lent to Mr. Holbrook by a friend. At the very first he had

been inclined to believe that Marian's lover must needs be one of the worthless bachelor crew with which the baronet was accustomed to surround himself. He had only abandoned that notion after his interview with Sir David Forster; and now it seemed that the baronet had deliberately lied to him. It was, of course, just possible that he was on a false scent after all, and that it was to some other part of the county Mr. Holbrook had brought his bride; but such a coincidence seemed, at the least, highly improbable. There was no occasion for him to remain in doubt very long, however. At the Grange he must needs be able to obtain more definite information.

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